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264.

DIME NOVELS



MOUNTAIN KATE.

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OR,

LOVE IN THE TRAPPING-GROUNDS.

A TALE OF THE POWDER RIVER COUNTRY.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

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MOUNTAIN KATE.

CHAPTER I.

"MOUNTAIN KATE."

"TURN out, boys—turn out! It'll be well-nigh onto day afore ye git your grub ett."

The voice was a somewhat peculiar one, but not unpleasant to the ear, though did one judge from the regretful grunt that greeted it, the speech was a most unwelcome one to those whom it aroused from a sound slumber.

The scene before us is one not frequently met with, and never within the pale of civilization. It is, in fact, what might be called a trapper's home, serving as his head-quarters during the season, from which he could make short excursions in any direction when the weather permitted, and when he could make a paying haul of peltries.

This "home" was of peculiar construction, but well adapted to the purpose for which it was intended: combined comfort and safety. It was composed of a front and roof, with two half-sides.

First, a location had been chosen near the river, where was a high hill, sheltered from the north and east winds. Then a hole had been dug into the steep bank, after which green cottonwood had been brought into requisition for the building.

The small logs were hewn and dovetailed, so as to render the inmates comparatively safe from bullets entering the interstices. Thus, when the work was completed, only the front of the structure could be seen, having the appearance of being built against the perpendicular bank.

The advantage thus given the inmates in case of an attack, may easily be stated. While the ground was frozen, an entrance could only be effected through the front. To attack this, the enemy must expose themselves freely. The green

wood, full of sap, would not burn, so entrance, if any, must be forced.

Besides being easily defended, a hut such as this is very warm, and easily made comfortable. The fire at the back, whose smoke curls upward through the narrow hole-chimney keeps one warm as toast.

Let not the reader be provoked at this long description. Why we are thus minute will be duly explained.

This sort of head-quarters has become more common in late days than of old, though by no means in general use. There are still trappers—veterans in the service, who seem alike insensible to the cold and exposure—who jeer at and condemn the babies who use such.

"'Tisn't morning yet, is it, Tobe?" yawned one of the two men whose slumber had been broken by the man whose call heads this chapter.

"Yas, it is *thet*. Go down an' souse your head in the hole I cut through the ice, an' you'll feel all right. Make haste—it's 'most time to start on our rounds," replied he who was called Tobe.

The young man opened the slab door and ran down to the river-bank. Though yet early in the season, the ground was covered to the depth of a foot with snow, and the river was already beginning to freeze near its banks.

Ablutions performed, the young trapper returned to the hut, where he found his comrades busily engaged in broiling meat, the savory smell of which proclaimed it buffalo-steaks, from one slaughtered before their usual winter migration southward.

The firelight flickered brightly over the faces and forms of the three trappers, and lent a cosy look to the rude abode. To the walls still hung sundry pelts, torn from the beaver, otter or mink, that were not yet sufficiently cured to be packed away.

Tobe Castor, the eldest of the party, was a professional trapper. From boyhood he had followed the life, and now, though but little over thirty years of age, he was regarded among the craft as a first-class hand.

He was very tall, of a rather spare build, but his frame was covered with good muscle and brawn, that a life of con-

stant toil and exertion had rendered as firm and tireless as bands of tempered steel. His hair, worn long, was corn-colored or sandy: a thin, spare beard of the same hue covered the lower portion of his face. His small gray eyes, while displaying considerable humor, were at the same time shrewd and cunning.

The next, a medium-sized man of near Castor's age, was Tom Taylor. He was good-looking, dark as a Spaniard, well educated, and of a rather taciturn disposition.

The third member, Frank Yates, was nearly a decade younger than his comrades. He was tall, well built, of a massive yet active form, well skilled in gymnastics and the use of arms.

He was the son of wealthy parents, and had taken a fancy to pass one winter in the trapping-grounds, in which resolve Taylor joined him. Together they journeyed West, and at Marysville, Kansas, engaged Tobe Castor to act as guide and instructor.

Thus it chanced that we find the veteran trapper in such an abode. He knew that the unseasoned "settlement boys" could never stand the exposure of a winter's trapping, as it is usually conducted, and for their sake had this "dug out" been constructed.

It was now in the latter part of November, and they had been at work for more than a month. Their success had been fair, so far, and while having "lots of fun," bade fair to make a "pile" as well.

"Now, boys," said Tobe, when the edge of hunger had been taken off, "we're goin' to work in airnest. The bufflers hes gone funder south, an' in co'se the reds hes gone too, as they don't keep fur apart. You know the lay o' the kentry well a-plenty, now, not to git lost, an' from this on, each one 'll take a sep'rate beat. Each one must 'tend to his own traps, skin an' stretch the pelts, keepin' his eend well up. We'll take turn about cookin', an' t'others 'll see to keepin' grub on hand. What say?"

"I'm agreed," said Yates, "and I know Tom is."

Taylor nodded while masticating a morsel of juicy steak.

"Good! you each know where we sot your traps—best start out an' look to 'em. Set them what's sprung, an' then

come back. We must kill some bait to p'ison wolves with to-night."

There was little more said. Thus far, as there was danger of falling in with roving bands of Indians, the party had kept pretty well together; but now that this danger was greatly lessened, and the two young men had gained a fair idea of the work, their life was to take a more business-like turn.

The hut was left in charge of Turk, a huge mastiff, crossed with bull, and the trio set out upon their rounds. We will follow Frank Yates, as on that day he was fated to encounter something that would change the whole tenor of their lives, either for better or worse.

As yet their operations had been confined to the main stream—Powder river—on which their head-quarters had been chosen. Along the left bank of this, above their den, was the beat of Frank Yates.

He hastened along, whistling merrily, for the clear, cold air was very bracing, and he was in prime health. As the light of day came clearer, a dandy of the cities would have stared aghast at the young trapper's outfit.

On his head was a conical cap of wolf-skins lined, with ear-flaps coming down and tying beneath the chin. A *wam-mus* of wolf-skin: a sort of tight-fitting sack, minus sleeves, reaching below the waist; heavy mole-skin pants, buffalo moccasins, the skin being stripped entire from the animal's legs, then one end sewed up, into which the wearer's feet were thrust, while a stout thong held them close to the knees.

Such was our young trapper's garb; rude, but essential to comfort in that cold region.

A short-barreled rifle of heavy caliber, a brace of revolvers, Colt's Navy pattern, a stout-bladed bowie-knife and a short handled ax, were his weapons. The latter was for cutting stakes and floats to secure the traps.

A small pouch contained a supply of "beaver bait;" beside it hung several "open links" to mend any broken chain. In this sketch the reader has before him a trapper of the present day, who combines convenience with the other traits.

Evidently Frank's fortune was not to be largely increased

by the proceeds of that day's trapping, for the first half-dozen that he visited were found empty, and still set. Wondering at this sudden falling off, Yates reached the next trap.

Like the others, it was set, and seemingly just as he had left it. But as he stooped low down, Frank's suspicions were aroused.

Upon both jaws were particles of fine fur, that he knew had come from the leg of a beaver. How came it there, while the trap was unsprung?

That admitted of but one answer, as he had oiled and rubbed the traps thoroughly, before setting last them. They had been sprung, and some one had removed the game, afterward setting the traps, to avoid suspicion!

Naturally enough, this created not a little excitement in the young man's mind, for it spoke plainly of danger; not only to their profits, but to their lives as well. And that this was a cunning and adroit thief, was equally plain.

Search as he might—and under Tobe Castor's tuition, Frank's eyesight had wonderfully sharpened—he could find no other traces left by the marauder. The foaming waters had swept away all such, and he had not stepped ashore anywhere near the “slides” where the traps were set.

Frank stood beside the last trap—empty like the rest—his face lighted by an angry glow. Had his gaze lighted upon the fur-thief then, it would have gone hard with the rogue.

“One thing is certain,” muttered Yates, reflectively. “The rascal must have his quarters somewhere near here, or else he would have stolen the traps, as well. No doubt he counts on having a pretty soft thing, but he'll slip up on it. I'll find him out if I have to watch a trap night and day!”

Frank paused abruptly with a start. As he spoke, his gaze turned down upon the stream, and, close to shore, he noticed where a man's foot had trod upon a lump of soft clay, leaving a nearly perfect imprint.

“Ha! I have not been up that far—it must be his! Small, neatly shaped—a moccasin; and the toe pointing up-stream. Mayhap I can track the fellow home—I'll try it, anyhow!”

Yates kept along the edge of the stream for several hundred yards, and then ~~his keen eyes detected~~ where the thief

had left the stream : the broken edge of a snowdrift, where the crust had not been thick enough to bear his weight. But then upon the frozen snow, hard almost as ice, Frank soon lost the trail.

While searching for it, the quick, heavy thud of horse's hoofs, in rapid gallop, startled him. Frank sprung back and sunk down in a small hollow, where his body was below the level of the snow around, and with cocked rifle he awaited the result.

The sound came from a narrow defile-like valley almost directly before him. Scarcely had Frank located this, than the rider appeared in full view, seemingly about to override him ; but then, abruptly turning, dashed up the river, toward a second valley, where were several large trees and a scattered patch of plum-bushes.

Yates could not entirely suppress the cry of wondering admiration that rose to his lips as this strange apparition dashed past him. And truly, there was little marvel in his feeling surprised.

The rider was a woman, mounted upon a snow-white horse of great beauty, though its small size proclaimed it a mustang or Indian pony. Even in its fleeting glance, Frank saw enough to feel that he beheld an uncommonly beautiful woman, and springing to his feet he was just in time to catch another glimpse as she disappeared amidst the plum thicket alluded to.

As he stood thus, new and significant sounds saluted his hearing, coming from the direction in which the strange rider had disappeared. He knew that she was in trouble.

A shrill scream, an affrighted neigh, the confused beating of hoofs upon the frozen snow ; then a human voice, a sharp report, closely followed by a muffled snarl. The sound of a fleeing horse, two more shots in quick succession, with an angry cry, told the young trapper that the rider must have been unhorsed.

Without pausing to reflect upon the possible danger to himself, Frank Yates darted hastily toward the spot, his rifle ready cocked. A few leaps carried him around the turn, and then a thrilling sight met his gaze.

The woman he had seen was upon the ground, half-lying,

half-supported against a huge boulder. Standing partly over, partly upon her, was a wild beast, its eyes glowing vividly, its long talons tearing the thick garments, its powerful jaws apparently closed upon the woman's left arm that, thrown up, guarded her throat.

At that moment a revolver in her right hand pointed to the animal's heart, was discharged, and another muffled snarl broke the air, telling how hard the bullet had struck, and Frank could see that the woman was coolly cocking the weapon once more.

He flung up his rifle, and, with a quick aim, fired at the animal's head. With a fierce scream, the brute sprang high into the air, seemingly death-stricken. But as Frank sprang forward it rose and darted upon him.

Its heavy weight bore the trapper backward to the snow, but, while one hand forcibly held back the bloody jaws, Frank's long knife flashed in the sunlight, and the struggle was ended, almost ere it had commenced. With a dying snarl, the fierce beast fell back, tearing the snow in its last throes.

As Frank arose, he beheld the strange woman standing close beside him, gazing curiously into his face. For a moment they stood thus, seemingly trying to read each other's character. The trapper was the first one to speak:

"Pardon me, lady, but you are hurt?"

"No, only a few scratches that are nothing. But I must thank you that it is so. I had but one more shot, and the brute was hard-lived. My arm was weakening—then he would have had me by the throat."

Frank was doubly surprised now that he heard her voice for the first time with distinctness. He wondered greatly how it was that such a being was living in that wild section.

She was young—evidently still in her teens—yet of a superbly developed form and beautiful face. Her complexion was dark, yet of that rare clearness and purity through which the rapid flow of blood was distinctly visible, showing that no aboriginal taint was in her veins.

Her form was garbed in a fancifully-ornamented suit of whitely bleached doe-skin; from one shoulder depended a

cloak of the silver fox, thickly lined and wadded. Moccasins and leggings protected her lower limbs. A *piquante* cap of fine fur, from the side of which floated a scarlet plume, lay upon the snow, having been lost during the struggle. Her hair, loosed by the same, floated far down her shoulders in silken masses, black and glossy. Her trim waist was encircled by an embroidered belt, in which rested a jeweled poniard, and the empty sheath of the revolver of which she had made such good use.

This was the picture that Frank beheld. Her voice was clear and calm, with a rich, mellow cadence, its evenness as she spoke evincing the presence of no usual courage, so recently after her death-grapple.

Little wonder, then, that Yates was bewildered by such a vision, in that wild and dangerous section, where, in winter, the sight of a squaw is a great rarity, much less a beautiful pale-face.

An amused smile playing around her full lips, showed Frank that his bewilderment was observed, and conscious that his stare had been rude, he stammered an apology.

"It is but natural," laughed the strange being, "considering the time and place. But let me thank you—only for your timely assistance, I would now be lying as that beast is."

Frank glanced toward the animal, and saw that it was a rare one for that region; he had never met its like before. Its thick body, short, stout legs, shaggy coat and bushy tail, the long curved claws and dog-like jaws, together with its remarkable tenacity of life, recalled the fabulous stories he had often heard regarding it, and he knew that he beheld a wolverine: the *carcajou* of the Canadian voyageurs, the "Injun devil" of the trappers. Not even the panther or the black bear is so greatly dreaded.

"Are you sure you are not hurt?" cried Frank, anxiously. "The excitement may prevent you from noticing it at present. Your arm—he had it in his mouth."

"My cloak, rather," laughed the woman. "It has suffered the most."

"How did it happen? I didn't know they would attack a rider in that way."

"It was lying in wait in yonder tree, and as I passed under, it sprung down, alighting on Snowdrift's haunches. The fright caused Snowdrift to rear, and I—clumsy rider!—fell off. You know the rest."

"Your horse is—ha! is not that it?" cried Frank, as a shrill whicker was heard from up the valley.

"Yes. He has come back to find me. I will call him up," and the woman blew a tiny silver whistle.

After a moment's indecision, there came the quick thud of hoof-beats, and the snow-white mustang dashed up beside its mistress, whickering joyfully, though eying the dead beast with evident suspicion. It had escaped with but a few scratches, owing to the assailant being so suddenly unhorsed.

"A noble animal, lady. But pardon me—I am a rough, plain fellow, and used to blunt speaking. I own up that I am very curious to learn how it is that I meet a lady in this wild country. You can not have been here long, else we would have met before. Can you trust me far enough to gratify my curiosity?"

"Yes—because your face tells me you possess honor and truth. I need no better evidence that you are a gentleman. Besides, you have earned the right. I will tell you who and what I am, though perhaps 'twould be wiser if we parted now; then you might remember me—if ever—with respect and kindly feeling," somewhat gloomily added the woman.

"You speak in enigmas," said Frank, not a little surprised. "I, too, profess some skill in physiognomy, and I read that you are a true lady; but why add that? I will not attempt a defense so needless. Little danger, lady, but that I will think of you often and kindly enough—perhaps too much so for my own peace of mind."

"There—I did not ask for compliments, and you are taking the surest method of making me detest you," impatiently cried the strange being.

"Truth is not flattery; but I will try and not offend again. You promised—"

"To tell you who and what I am; so I will. But first, yourself. You are not a trapper—that is, not a professional one."

"No. I only came out here for the sport, and to kill time."

"'Twould have been better had you chosen some other place for that, I fear."

"I differ. I esteem myself as very fortunate in coming here."

"But you are in danger—in great danger, every day of your life, while staying here. I don't mean by the usual perils of the life, but other, greater ones, against which you can not guard. If you value your life, you will persuade your companions to leave this region immediately," earnestly uttered the woman.

"That would be difficult, if not impossible. But how did you learn that I had companions here?"

"I know all about you—where you live, your numbers, names and all. And others know, too. There rests your danger. Prudence is at times the perfection of bravery. It is no shame for three men to retreat from two score and more, who are bent upon their destruction. Take my advice—it is that of one who wishes you well."

"If you know us all, you doubtless know something of Tobe Castor's character. Is he a man to flee from a vague and undefined peril? Tell me plainly what is the nature of the danger that threatens us, and I promise to state it fairly to my comrades, and abide by their decision."

"I will do so. You have heard of Carl Shensen?"

"The outlaw—the land-pirate! Indeed I have!" cried Yates, in surprise.

"You are trapping on ground that he claims. A treaty with the Indians gave him a right to all furs caught within a circuit of fifty miles from this spot. He has lately come back to his winter-quarters, near here, and looks upon you three men as interlopers. If you know so well his reputation, you can easily divine your danger, when I add that his band numbers over two score men, all devoted to him by the strongest of bonds. His spies have traced you out, and even now may be taking measures to effect your captivity or death."

"May I ask how you gained this information? Not that I doubt your words or good-will, but it seems strange that a lady like you should know any thing concerning such a gang."

"I am his—Shensen's daughter," quietly replied the woman.

Frank stood aghast. He could scarce believe his senses. This beautiful creature the child of that man—of whom so many bloody and ruthless deeds had been told—whose hands were so deeply dyed in innocent blood? Impossible!"

She read this incredulity in his face, and smiled sadly. Her voice was low as she added:

"Yes, I am his daughter. No wonder you look horrified. And to think that you complimented a criminal—or the daughter of a criminal! Is it not humiliating?"

"You wrong me, lady," earnestly uttered the young trapper, "as well as yourself. Your father may be all that men call him, but *you* are blameless of that. That face does not cover a heart of sin. This confession but increases my respect for you, for how few, leading the life that must have been yours, would have passed through it so pure—so entirely unmarked!"

"Thank you. I am very grateful for your words. Had I heard more such, I would have been better than I now am. But think of my life! Left motherless in infancy, with no living relative save my father, I have been a wanderer all my days. I grew up amidst scenes of wrong and violence, and was taught to believe them right, until I grew into a clearer light. Now, every day of my life is a torture. And yet, what can I do? Despite all, I love my father, and he is very kind to me. That makes it still harder for me to see him stain his soul with such deeds. But, bad as he is, I believe my influence has saved him from becoming worse. Whenever I feel tempted to flee from them—to try and begin a new and better life—I think of that, and feel that my duty is here with him. Besides, I have no friends—no living relative, and where could I go? What could I do? Nothing! I am doomed to live out this life, to die as I have ever lived—an outcast!" bitterly uttered the maiden.

Frank knew not what to say, though he deeply felt for the strange being he had so strangely met. But then she roused up, and, with an effort, cast aside the gloomy air that had fallen upon her.

"Bah! I am growing sentimental—something I detest."

Pardon me for boring you. But you will heed my warning?"

"I will tell my comrades what you have said. Whatever they decide I will agree to. One moment, before you go—may I not hope to meet you again, soon? Please say yes?"

"It is better not. I have hard thoughts now regarding the life I am compelled to lead, and the characters I am forced to associate with, and seeing an honest gentleman, a type of the outer world, would only increase my longing to escape from this living death. No, it is best so. But remember, there is danger here in every day that you remain. Take warning from me, who wishes you and your friends good, and retreat while there is yet time. Do not delay—it may cost your life!"

With these words she sprung into the saddle, but Frank touched the bridle rein. She turned her head.

"One moment. If we decide to leave, will you not let me see you again, to tell you good-by?"

"Well—yes. You can leave a note in the fork of this tree—direct it to 'Mountain Kate,' and I will get it. Now may I go?" laughed the maiden.

Reluctantly Frank withdrew his hand, and then with a gay wave of hers, Mountain Kate dashed away up the valley, vanishing around the bend like a flash of light.

CHAPTER II.

THE SPY.

It was some moments after the disappearance of Mountain Kate around the bend, before Frank Yates could remove his gaze from the point where he had last beheld her; and then it was a half-sigh of mingled regret and perplexity.

In fact, the young trapper had become deeply interested in this strange being, who was so gloriously beautiful and so fearless, while seemingly possessing a kindly heart and tender

sensibilities. Frank would have laughed, had any one hinted at *love*, but in truth, the maiden who had given the peculiar name of "Mountain Kate," had, in that brief interview, more deeply interested his heart than ever woman had done before.

"Beautiful — gloriously beautiful! and yet she is that bloody demon's daughter!" muttered Frank, as he began carefully reloading his rifle. "I can hardly believe it yet; wonder if he didn't steal her from some rich, noble family? 'Twould be a fitting sequel to our romantic meeting," laughed the trapper, as he stooped over the dead beast.

"I'll take the hide off—'twill be a good remembrancer of the adventure. Little danger of my forgetting it soon, though. Those eyes still burn in my mind. Jove! how they flashed as she taunted me with complimenting the daughter of a criminal!"

But the astute reader can readily imagine all the rest. He knows that Frank was young, ardent, and then the fair lady had flattered him to his very face. What man could withstand that, coming from a beautiful woman? Little wonder then that the young trapper was ready to swear that Mountain Kate was perfection; and taking it with a wee grain of salt, we echo his opinion.

Though of no very extensive experience as a hunter, Yates managed to skin the wolverine in good style, and then with it strapped upon his back, he set out for the "dug-out." The warning he had received, now that he was no longer under the glow of Mountain Kate's lustrous eyes, sunk deeper into his mind, and he began to think there might be real danger impending.

When he reached the "dug-out," Frank found both his comrades there, they having completed their rounds. That their traps had not been robbed, he had ample proof in the number of pelts that lay around, being arranged for stretching.

"Hellow, Frank," called out Tobe, glancing up, "what luck? We did bully. Thar's a rip-snortin' spree ahead o' us, when we git back to old St. Joe, an'— Thunder!"

Frank stepped within and flung the hide from his shoulder. Tobe recognized the animal from which it had been strip-

ped, and that called forth the ejaculation terminating his congratulations.

"Injun devil, by ge-lory! Boy, bully for you—it's some-thin' to brag on, that is. Look, Taylor—five holes an' a jab! An' you hain't hurt, nuther?" rattled Tobe, turning again toward Yates.

"No—I had help, though I gave the finishing touch, with one hand on its throat."

"Help? Git out—don't I *know* better? Thar hain't nobody round here to help ye, 'cept us, an' we—"

"There you're out, Tobe, for there *are* other persons near by, and some who mean us no good, at that. But listen, and I'll tell you the whole affair."

Frank gave a clear and circumstantial account of what had befallen him that day, his comrades listening with breathless interest. As Tobe heard the warning given by Mountain Kate, and her mention of Carl Shensen, he dropped his pipe in momentary dismay.

"Thar it is—*durn* the crooked luck! I thought thet cussed imp hed kicked the bucket, for he hain't been hereaway for the last three year. Now, jest as the pelts air a-swarm-in' lively, he must stick in his or'nary nose jest to spile the fun. But she told ye true, Frank. He's jest old Satan when he gits his mad up, or takes a spite ag'in' a feller. Thar hain't nothin' too bad or cussed fer him to do then. Ef so be he raally is down on us, it'll be hot old times, onless we pack up an' float our sticks som'ers outside o' his cl'arin'. How is it—shell we vamish?"

"I leave it to you," said Frank. "I'll either stay or go, just as you please. We promised to be guided by you in all things."

"An' you, Taylor?"

"We are making a good thing here. I move that we see this Shensen, and get him to listen to reason."

"You wouldn't see him more'n onc't then," dryly observed Castor. "He's got a mighty quietin' way about him. His hand drops to a pistil-butt, nat'ally as a duck 'takes to a June bug. Mebbe I could do somethin' with him, though. He'd orter be kinder 'commodat'ed, bein' as I onc't saved his life, arter his skelp hed fa'rly started. Ef I'd 'a' knowed it was

him, though, durned ef I'd 'a' lifted a finger. But never mind that. Seein' you leave it to me, I say *stay*; anyhow, until I kin git a word 'th the imp. Mebbe it'll be all right when he knows who we air."

"Is he really such a desperate character as those fellows made him out to be, at Marysville?" asked Frank.

"Wal, yas, I don't know but he is, purty nigh, though I reckon they *did* lie, *some*. It's nat'ral, ye see. Near as I kin make out, he used to live in Kaintuck, an' got mixed up, somehow, 'th a gang o' hoss-thieves thet was bn'sted up thar. They couldn't *prove* nothin' ag'inst him, but they giv' him a thunderin' lickin', an' then ordered him to leave the State. Thet riz the devil in him, bigger'n a woodchuck, an' one night not long a'terwards, he kem back an' slit the throats o' two o' those who'd done the whippin', stole a hoss an' kerried off his lettle gal: the one who's Mountain Kate now.

"Then he jest nat'ally spread hisself, an' soon got to be the best knowed feller in the State. He picked up a gang o' the same kidney, an' fer a year, war hevin' things purty much his own way. But then the vigilantys went fer him, wiped out his gang, an' purty nigh bagged him.

"Next thing he was heerd o' out this way, a-goin' fer emigrant trains, an' sech like, leadin' a big band o' red-skins. As sech fallers will, he drawed together another gang o' white devils, an' sence then he's ranged from the Missouri to the Rio Grande, hevin' things purty much thar own way, as he's good fri'nds 'th most all the defrunt tribes. This gal o' his'n al'ays rides with him, an' some do say thet she's a bigger devil nor he is, while ag'in thar's others who sw'ar 'at she's a angel in pettycoats. Now you know what kind o' feller we've got to buck ag'inst."

"They lie about *her*. If she is so bad, why did she warn us of danger?"

"Smitten with your good looks, may be," sneered Taylor. "Go in on your nerve, Yates, and win the head devil's goodwill through her."

"Best spare your wit, Tom Taylor, until you can find some more appropriate subject to jest about. She is a lady, and you will please speak of her as such, in my presence, at least," rather hotly replied Frank.

"Thar, boys, don't git to pullin' ha'r. Trouble a-plenty 'thout thet. I'm goin' to take a scout around, to see ef thar's any deviltry afoot fer to-night. You fellers hed better stay here, and see thet nobody don't git inside. You kin be fixin' the pelts. Keep a good look-out, an' ef anybody comes, stop 'em at a decent distance. Onderstand?"

"Yes. But you don't really expect an attack to-day, do you Tobe?"

"No, not afore night, anyhow. They'll think to ketch us nappin'. I'm jest goin' over to look ef they're at the old camp. I'll be back afore long. Let Turk loose, a'ter I'm gone; he'll give you warnin', it's likely."

"How about that bait for wolves?"

"We'll let that drop for now. Thar's time a-plenty for them, when we've got nothin' o' more 'portance. You stay here until I git back."

"If you see that Mountain Kate, Tobe, give her my compliments, and say that I intend hunting her up, to see if she is the angel Frank believes," called out Taylor, as Castor left the dug-out.

The trapper glided rapidly along the base of the hill in which the hut was located, until coming to a sort of valley, leading out to the prairie beyond, he entered that, with the air of a man who had some point fully in view. As he said, Tobe intended reconnoitering the old camp occupied by Shensen in bygone years, to see if the enemy were located there.

But this object was destined to be frustrated, or, at least, postponed for the time being. Tobe Castor abruptly paused, then glided to the left, up a gradual slope.

Here he stooped and began carefully examining the surface of the snow. As the sun glinted brightly across it, his keen eye had noticed several abraded places, where the tiny projections upon the crust had been crushed, as if beneath some considerable weight.

"It's a man—a good sized one, at that. He wore moccasins. Thar his foot slipped; an' by the way he caught hisself, he's young an' spry. A old moose 'd 'a' fell flat. But when was it made? We didn't none o' us three come this way sence yest'day. Ha! now I hev got it!" cried Castor, with exultation, as he glided still further up the slope.

A scrubby bush stood there, bare and leafless. Around its stem, the eddying wind had left a circular hole, clear to the ground, a few inches in diameter, up the center of which grew the stem.

The man that Tobe Castor was trailing, had stood beside this bush, and one foot, resting close to the hole where the crust was weakened, had broken through. This, the trapper knew, would tell him whether the trail had been made lately, or on the day before.

"Thet settles it!" muttered Tobe, rising erect, with a swift glance around him. "It was did 'ithin a hafe hour, at furd-est. 'Ca'se why: the wind sets fa'rly toward it, freezin' cold. Ef it hed bin made a hour, the snow on the upper sides 'd 'a' bin friz stiff; now it's still soft an' damp.

"Thar's the argyment—what's the answer? Why, jest this. The feller what made it ain't fur off, jest now. Did Frank? No; he kem down the river, an' Tom an' me, we kem up the river. We hain't none on us bin through here sence yest'day. Then it was made by some one else—made by a spy o' the old man's; mebbe the one Mountain Kate told Frank about. He hain't kem back, or I'd 'a' see'd him out in the open. Then he's up thar still. Up thar, a-watchin' fer us to leave the place, I reckon. Hope he'll stay until we do; consarn him; but I don't guess he will. 'Ca'se why?—I'm goin' to smoke him out o' thar."

As the sun's rays glimmered clearly upon the bright surface, Tobe Castor could quite plainly distinguish where the spy's footsteps had destroyed the gloss, and could also see that there were only one set of tracks; those pointing upward. Hence his decision that the scout was still upon the hill. His mind was made up to effect a capture, uninjured; why, may be seen ere long.

Castor started back to the valley, merrily whistling, as though perfectly unconcerned, for he did not know but that the spy was even then observing him from his eyrie, and he wished to disarm the suspicion his searching might have aroused. Instead of striking out toward the old camping ground, as he at first had intended, the trapper turned to the left and quickly circled around the hill above.

"Ef he's keepin' watch o' the dug-out, then he can't see me

until I'm onto him. Here goes to resk it, anyhow," muttered Castor, as he glided cautiously up the hillside.

Were his reasonings correct? Tobe expected to find the spy in a comfortable niche, some few yards below the hill's crest, on the further side, or that overlooking the river, as the only spot from whence a view of the "dug-out" could be attained, combined with safety from discovery by them below. And he speedily proved the correctness of his surmises.

Tobe paused upon the crest, and then peered cautiously over and downward toward the spot where he expected to find his game. A peculiar glitter filled his eyes as he beheld the form of a man seated behind a cedar bush, coolly smoking a pipe, while closely watching the hut below.

A quick glance around showed Tobe that he was master of the situation. The spy could not gain shelter, even if undisturbed, under several moments, and all that time would be at the trapper's mercy.

Castor saw that the spy was heavily armed, and seemingly one well able to care for himself. But bringing his long rifle forward, ready for quick use, Tobe called out:

"Hellow, thar—you! Ain't it rather cold settin' on thet snow?"

To say that the spy was surprised, would scarcely do justice to his emotions, at this abrupt summons, and he sprung to his feet with ludicrous activity. As he glared around, he beheld the grinning phiz of Castor peering at him over the leveled rifle, and a bitter curse broke from his lips as he realized how completely he was entrapped.

"Don't cuss—'tain't perlite. Stop thar! Ef you try thet, down ye go, shure's my name's Tobe Castor!" cried the trapper, sternly, as the spy made a motion toward cocking his rifle.

"What do you want?" sullenly.

"Want *you*, I reckon. Guess you'd better come up here, an' then we'll go down to thet shanty you seem so curious about. Got grub, thar, an' a good fire. Kin warm yourself. Must be cold, ain't ye? Your britches is all soaked through, settin' in that hole you've thawed through the snow. Ketch cold ef ye don't mind."

"I have no business with you. What right have you to

molest me? I am an honest hunter, and these hills are free to all, I believe. 'Take down that rifle—have you no more sense than to be aiming at a fellow in that style?"

"*Git* out! Honest nothin'! Clem Barodyne, you cain't play that on me. Ye foller the same old trade, I see, thet ye did three year sence. Come—this snow's pesky wet, when a feller sets on it too long. Come up here. We want you, down at the dug-out?"

"I'm not Clem—what's-his-name, nor do I know what you mean. If I looked at your hut down there, what harm have I done by thet?"

"Made all our heads ache, you looked so durned sharp. But look here, I'm gittin' tired o' this foolin'. Better mind. Ef my finger shed trimble, you'd never be o' no a'count to hold water ag'in; thar'd be a hole bored plum through ye. Come up here, I say!" impatiently cried Tobe Castor.

"Tell me first what it is you wish with me, or you may shoot away. But mind, if you miss, it'll be your last shot."

"I ain't one o' the missin' kind. But see here, I know who you air, an' what you're up to. Come up an' le's talk it over. Ef I meant you hurt, wouldn't I 'a' plugged you at the fust start? Don't be sech a durned fool. We want to see ef we cain't make tarms 'th the old man to let us stay the season out. Come up, an' as long as you act decent, you shain't be hurt. You know me, an' know thet Tobe Castor don't never go back on his word."

The spy hesitated no longer, but scrambled up the hill, as if assured of no harm. Castor lowered his rifle, but kept a keen look-out for treachery, as he knew the man well with whom he had to deal.

"You go down a liddle fust," he dryly observed, as the spy stood beside him. "You hain't promised nothin', an' I hev."

"You don't suspect that I would attempt to hurt you, or take you unawares?" rather angrily demanded the man.

"Lord, Clem, don't I know you're too honest to do sech a thing? But then you see, your foot mought accidentally slip, an' you tum'le ag'inst me, which would eend in a awkward fall on the ice. It's safest the way I say. Go ahead."

The spy sullenly complied, and Castor trod close in his tracks, with a hand upon his revolver-hilt. But if the man

had really meditated treachery, he thought better of it, and trudged obediently along to the hut, where they were confronted by the two younger trappers.

"A visitor, boys," said Tobe, chuckling. "Got wet, ye see, an' wants to git dry by our fire. Thar you air, Clem. Take a cheer—on the ground. Frank, shet the door; put up the bars, too. They'll help keep out the cold. Feel better, now, don't ye, old feller?"

"I feel as though I was a prisoner," growled the spy, spitefully.

"Sho! now that's queer! Cold's strikin' in, I reckon. Better turn 'round an' warm your clo'es. Dretful uncomfortable, wet britches thet way. What was you watchin' us so clus fer, anyhow?" added Tobe, in a quick, sharp tone.

"I wasn't watching you."

"Now, Clem Barodyne, you're tellin' a—thet is, to speak perlately, you're mistook—orfully mistook. You—"

"I tell you I'm not Clem Barodyne."

"Then you lie, do I? But that kin be easy proved. Roll up your right sleeve. I give Clem a cut in the fo'arm, onc't, when he tried to slip my wind. Show that it ain't thar, an' you may go your way, an' I'll ax pardon for my mistake," quietly uttered Tobe.

A sullen growl was the only response. Castor smiled.

"Thar now, what's the use in tryin' to play 'possum? Show up your hand, an' we'll play the game out with faced keerds. The old man—by which I mean Carl Shensen—sent you here to watch us?"

"Yes."

"Good—so fur. Now keep right on—it's easy, a'ter you onc't git started. What does he mean to do?"

"Rub you out, for being fool enough to come back to his grounds, after being warned and told the penalty."

"Yas, he did warn me, that's a fac', an' ef I'd 'a' knowed o' his comin' 'bout here, it's like I'd 'a' chose another range, to save trouble. But this is the fourth year sence he was in these parts. I'd thought he'd left for good, an' as these boys wanted to spend the season trappin', I picked this as the easiest and least dangersome."

"You've made the mistake—you'll have to pay for it,"

quietly replied Barodyne, but with a triumphant glitter in his snaky eyes.

"Mebbe not—I don't think the old man's mem'ry is so short as thet 'mounts to. I saved his life."

"And he squared that by saving yours, the time you gave me this cut. Don't count on that to save you from his law."

"I don't—intirely. But go on. You say he means to rub us out—when?"

"I don't know—and if I did, I wouldn't tell you. You know as much now as you will ever get out of me."

"Gittin' better, ain't ye? Britches 'most dry, I reckon. Wal, I don't know as there's any use in squeezin' ye. I've got 'bout ali I hev any need fer. Reckon you'd better stay here 'th the boys, while I go take a scout fer the old man's head-quarters."

"I'll go show you where they have settled," uttered Barodyne, striving in vain to disguise his eagerness.

"Not much, Mary Ann! Fact is, Clem, you're too willin'—too durned 'commodatin' all o' a suddent. You're a slip-ry cuss, Clem, but ye cain't foolish Tobe. I'd rather see the old man 'ithout you by," quietly chuckled Tobe.

"Do you mean to keep me a prisoner here, after what you promised?" hotly demanded Barodyne, his hand clutching a revolver.

"Easy now—keep cool, Clem. Knowed you'd ketch cold—the fever's got to your head a'ready. You're talkin' flighty, like. Who said any thin' 'bout pris'ners? Nobody. We don't keep none sech. A visitor—thet's what you be. A sort o' on'rery member o' our society, ye know. Thet pistil's too heavy fer ye, ain't it? Seems to weigh ye all down to one side. Must be orful tiresome. Hadn't ye better give it to me, to rest ye? A good weepin—but mine, here, 's a better one. Jest lis'en—hear that *click*? Like a watch-spring. Don't hev to snap twic't on a cap. Ef it shed go off now, it might hurt ye—'d make a hole big a-plenty fer Turk to jump through. Frank, s'pose you go thar. Clem wants to give you his pistil an' knife. They're too heavy fer his weak constertution to hold up any longer."

Tobe Castor uttered these words in a low, drawling tone,

with a peculiar smile playing around his thin lips. But there was a steely glitter in his gray eyes that Barodyne knew well how to interpret.

He knew that the whimsically-uttered request was a command, to disobey which might be dangerous. As Yates stepped forward, he reluctantly held the weapons forth.

Tobe Castor lowered his pistol with a grim chuckle, that doubly angered the spy. With a fierce curse he cocked his revolver and fired at Tobe. Sudden as was his action, Frank was quick enough to foil the murderous attempt.

A sudden kick knocked the pistol from Barodyne's hand, and the bullet was buried in the wooden roof. Then, with an angry cry, he clutched the outlaw by the throat, bearing him backward like a child.

"Let up, Frank," coolly uttered Tobe, "don't make the imp a nigger—he's gittin' black in the face a'ready. Thar—the durned varmint is gittin' too keerless to be 'lowed to han'le weepins. 'D jest's lieve hit a feller as not. Roll him over, an' I'll fix his hands. Ye see it's fer his sake that I tie the imp. He mought hurt hisself, when he comes to, an' sees thet a baby like you han'led him so easy. Thar, I reckon he'll do. Git up."

Frank stepped back as Castor finished binding his captive. Barodyne, who had been choked almost to insensibility, quickly recovered, and strove to arise, struggling violently.

"Ha! you have bound me! Tobe Castor, you lied—you said I should not be injured!" he cried, choking with rage.

"No more you shain't be. But when a feller goes crazy, he must be tied up to keep him from hurtin' folks."

"Crazy!"

"Yes; was'n't you? Didn't you try to shoot me, the best fri'nd you ever hed? 'Pears like you did. Hain't thet a crazy trick? Sounds like it, to me, anyhow."

"What are you going to do with me?" sullenly demanded Barodyne.

"Cure ye up, an' then turn ye loose! But fust, I'm goin' to visit the old man. Got any messidge to send him?"

An indignant snarl was the only response, and then Tobe, cautioning his comrades to keep good guard, turned and left the dug-out.

Had he known what was to occur before he again returned to the hut, he would have thought twice before setting forth upon the venture.

CHAPTER III.

TOBE AND THE OUTLAW CHIEF.

WHEN Tobe Castor had left the hut behind him, his looks changed greatly, and an expression of deep anxiety settled down upon his homely features. The mask he had worn while with his young comrades was now dropped, and it was plain that he regarded the situation as one of actual peril.

Had he been alone, his course of action would have been simple. He would have picked up his traps and moved on to another spot where he could trap in peace, so far as the outlaw band was concerned.

But now he was in doubt. The young men had hired him for the season, and he felt bound to consult their welfare before his own.

The cold weather was at hand—indeed it had already fairly set in—and he knew that neither of them were toughened enough to stand the exposure of an open season, and it would be a difficult matter—almost impossible—to build another “dug-out,” after finding a suitable place. Thus it came that he resolved to seek an interview with Shensen, and try to come to some amicable agreement, though knowing full well that he was incurring no slight risk in the venture.

True, he had rendered Shensen a favor—that of saving his life—but the outlaw seemed utterly devoid of gratitude, more especially when under the influence of liquor, as was but too frequently the case. At such times even the most trusted of his own band shunned him, in fear and trembling.

Tobe felt confident as to the spot where he would find the outlaw band encamped, and as the sun had already passed the meridian, he strode on at a rapid gait up the river. For several miles this was maintained, when he began to display more caution.

Finally he scaled a steep hill, and from its top, shielded behind a scrubby cedar, he gazed down upon the object of his search. A grunt of mingled satisfaction and regret escaped his lips, as he found that the encampment was indeed where he had suspected.

It had the appearance of a rude village, rather than a temporary encampment, and Tobe saw that the outlaws intended to spend the winter season there. This it was that displeased him, as it destroyed a little *ruse* of which he had thought.

Upon a small, level plateau, thickly studded with evergreens, was the village. This plateau formed the top of a hill, that had the appearance of having been cut in two, its upper half then cast to the winds.

This hill stood alone, entirely disconnected from those surrounding it, and without rifle-range from their crests, thus being a natural fort, easy of defense. Its sides were steep and precipitous, though such as could be scaled were it not for the defenders on top.

At the rear ran a narrow cañon, thickly strewn with boulders. As one end of this was hidden behind another hill, a cunning scout might gain the base of the table-hill, unseen by those on top, and then, unless closely guarded, could scale the bank and gain an entrance into the village.

From his position Tobe could look down upon this plateau, and had a fair view of the village. There were over a score of small but comfortable huts, near the center of which stood a larger one, with a sort of wing attached, that he had no difficulty in divining were the quarters of Carl Shensen and his daughter, Mountain Kate.

There were few human forms to be seen, though Tobe's keen eye detected several stationed along the sloping trail that led to the level ground below. This had been partly formed by hand, so as to allow the passing up and down of horses, a number of which he could see scattered among the trees, in a rude corral.

"Now the question is, ef I ain't a durned fool to go in thar, when I know the resk so well?" muttered Castor, as he slowly surveyed the scene. "It's easy a-plenty to git *in*, but the git-tin' *out*—thet's the thing! Wonder will I come out on my own legs, or on some other fool's? It all 'pends on the old

man. Ef he's sober, then I'll be safe; ef not, then not. Any how, here goes. Tobe Castor don't break down arter onc't settin' out fer a thing. Crawfish hain't his line—not much!"

The trapper descended to the level ground, and then strode fearlessly on, now in full view of the guards on duty. He courted attention, rather than sought to avoid it, for he knew the sentinel would then see that he was alone, and regard his approach with less suspicion.

When within gunshot of the hill, Castor paused, and removing his cap, waved it over his head as he shouted:

"Hellow, thar—*you* fellers!"

There was no reply, and one uninitiated would have supposed the hill deserted, as nothing of the lodges could be seen from the level. But Tobe was not to be baffled in that manner.

"I say—*hellow*! Durn it all, be ye deaf? I want to see the old man—Cap'n Shensen. You know me—I'm Tobe Castor."

"What do ye want, down thar, makin' sech a cussed heller-berloo?" growled a hoarse voice, sounding from near the hill's crest.

"Thunder! man, where air your ears? Hain't I bin tellin' you what I want fer the last half-hour, more or less? I want to see the old man—the boss—Cap'n Shensen. *Now* d'y' hear?" vociferated Tobe, in well-simulated anger.

"Do you know the Cap'n?" asked the same voice.

"Do I know—*git* out! S'pose I'd ax fer a gentleman ef I *didn't* know him? Must be green, *you*. Hain't got your sleep out yit, hev ye? In co'se I know him. Ef you don't b'lieve me, jist ax him an' see what be'll tell ye."

"Then ef you know him so well, why in thunder cain't ye come up, 'thout makin' so durned much fuss? But, ef you're lyin', you'd better say your pra'rs afore *he* sees ye. You won't hev no time, a'terwards," significantly added the sentinel, as Tobe Castor began the ascent.

"Thank ye fer nothin', fri'nd. I ain't in the habit o' tellin' lies, onless thar's somethin' to be gained by it. You hev n't bin 'th the band long, or you'd 'a' recognized my name."

"What's this Corker?" demanded a stern voice from be-

hind the guard, who quickly scrambled to his feet, in evident dread of the speaker.

"It's a feller what said he know'd you, Cap'n."

"Ha! who the devil are you?" fiercely turning toward where Tobe Castor stood, and the hand of the speaker clutched a revolver-hilt, threateningly.

"You didn't talk quite so f'erce, Cap'n Shensen, the day you axed me who it was that shot the 'Rapaho who bed ye down," coolly retorted the trapper, yet keenly eying the man before him, in readiness for sudden action.

It was a striking face and figure—one that would attract a second glance in almost any assembly. In features, boldly handsome, the tall, athletic figure, so perfectly proportioned, well corresponded.

Carl Shensen was a man whose years numbered over half a century, though he bore them well, his gray hairs being the brand of drink and dissipation, rather than of natural decay. The long hair and flowing beard of iron gray, gave him an imposing appearance, and when free from the influence of liquor, his face wore a dignified, even noble expression. In his cups, however, he was a devil incarnate.

He was clad in Indian tanned and worked buck-skin; a slouched hat of soft gray felt rested upon his head. His belt was thickly studded with weapons, yet he wore them with the careless air of one well accustomed to their use.

"You are Tobe Castor?" he uttered, in a changed tone, and yet it was not wholly cordial.

"Yes, I'm Tobe, though I s'posed you'd clean forgot me, sence you've sent a man to warn me off o' the grounds—or, ruther, sent a spy to hunt me out."

"What—how do you know that?" sternly demanded the outlaw chief, his eyes beginning to glitter.

"How? Easy a-nough, ef you on'y think so. Somebody 'd bin robbin' our traps, an' swoopin' 'round the 'dug-out.' In course I sot out to hunt him up. I found the feller—know'd him, too—an' jest 'vited him perlutely to call inside the shanty. He did so, an' I got it all out o' him. Hard work, though, fer he's true as steel to you, Cap. But I hed the deadwood on the cuss. Ye see, I 'membered him on account o' thet lit-

tle muss what we hed here onc't. I taxed him 'bout the scarred arm, an' he couldn't deny it."

"You mean Clem. Barodyne?"

"Yes."

"Well, where is he now?"

"At the dug-out, waitin' ontel I come back. I kinder thought it best I shed see you fust, 'afore lettin' him go, fer the cuss is hefty on the lies, an' thar's no tellin' what he wouldn't say."

"What is it you want of me? If he told you some, he must have told you all. Why didn't you take warning, and leave without running your head into a noose like this?"

"Is it a noose? Then you ain't what I took you fer," quietly uttered Tobe.

"And what was that?"

"A gentleman of honor," was the cool reply.

Shensen flushed deeply, and then laughed; but the laugh sounded constrained and unnatural.

"I do not claim that distinction. I am an outlaw—robber—murderer; worse, if can be. But I am just what *they* made me—I was innocent of all wrong until they drove me mad with disgrace. Curse them—curse them, one and all!" hissed the outlaw, his eyes flashing, his teeth grating, while his features were distorted with horrible anger.

"Yer see," hastily added Tobe, not fancying the turn thus given the conversation, "I thought I'd come an' state the case cl'arly to you, an' see ef we couldn't make some a'range-ment. You know I'm poor—hain't got nothin' 'cept what I make by my traps. Two young fellers hired me to come out here with 'em—I was to hev all the pelts thet was cotched, as pay, they furnishin' the outfit—an' I chose this beat, as I knowed you hed not bin here for three seasons past. Ef I'd thought you was comin' back, I wouldn't 'a' kem here; but to pull stakes an' travel now would spile the hull season, purty nigh, bein' as we'd hev to build a dug-out fer the boys. Thar's room here fer us both, an' fur a-plenty. Then whar's the use o' quarrelin'?" We'll promus not to interfere 'th any o' your 'rangements, ef you let us alone. We won't come no further up then we air now. How is it—a barg'in?"

"No! it is *not* a bargain. You are on my land—bought from the Indians and paid for, and you must leave. You remind me of a service—even if I had not already repaid it by saving your life, I do now. Any other than you I would have crushed at once. Instead, I let you go free, with whatever peltries you may have taken, though every one belongs to me. Don't ask any more, or I may regret granting even that much. You know my temper of old. It has not weakened any since. Better go, and follow my advice. I give you two days. At the end of that time I send my men to burn your dug-out. If you are still there, so much the worse for you. You scorch in it. Do you understand?"

"Yas; you speak plain a-plenty, I must say. But 'pears to me you're takin' a good deal fer granted," retorted Castor, his cheek flushing, and his lips twitching with anger. "You talk like I was a nigger. D' y' think I'm a squaw, to be skeered by big words? Not much, I ain't. D' y' think I'd set still an' let your men scorch me? Nary time. Ef they tried it, your roll-call would be a few names the shorter fer it."

"You dare talk in this manner to me—here in my own stronghold?" muttered Shensen, surprise for the moment getting the better of his anger.

"I dare a good many things, sometimes, when my hand's in. *You* cuss at a feller, who is jest as good a man as you *dare* be, an' then bile over ef he talks back a bit. Black looks don't skeer me wuth a cent," retorted the intrepid trapper.

"Do you know that your life is in my hands? That by one word I could have you torn limb from limb, or tortured to death?"

"Thet may be even so, but I reckon I'd hev time to put in more'n one lick fust. I sea'cely think you'd say thet word, bein' as I kem here on a fri'ndly arrand, but ef you *did*—"

"And if I did—what?"

"Why, the band would hev a chance to vote fer another chief, that's all," slowly uttered Castor, keenly eying the outlaw.

Shensen turned round, and there is little doubt that a tra-

gedy would have closely followed the trapper's blunt speech, had there not come an interruption at this moment. It came in a pleasing shape, and even as his young comrade had done, earlier in the day, Tobe Castor stared in mute admiration, forgetting his own peril.

"Father," softly uttered Mountain Kate, as she glided between the two men, "don't forget yourself. This man came here on an errand of peace. Do not stain your honor by violating that confidence."

"Go back to your room, Kate," and the chieftain's voice softened wonderfully. "I will not forget, again. He is safe from me while here. Go, now, and let me deal with him."

"Very well. And you, sir," turning to Castor, with a significant gesture unnoticed by Shensen, "would be wise did you bridle your tongue, and speak with a little more discretion."

"Thankee, Miss. You may be right—you must be, fer sech a han'some pictur' couldn't be wrong. But us trappers hev got souls as well as other folk, an' ain't used to bein' treated like we wasn't neither hafe white nor freeborn. The old man r'iled me consid'able by talkin' like I was a dog, an' I hed to talk back or bu'st. But it's over now, an' I'll be more keerful," respectfully uttered Tobe, his eyes glowing with pleasure, as he gazed upon the beautiful creature before him.

"You look as though you didn't remember me—and yet I should recognize you anywhere," half laughed Mountain Kate, not displeased at this mute tribute to her charms.

"Ef it hedn't bin fer what Frank told me 'bout you, I'd never 'spect you was the leetle gal I used to see here, thet time. I thought he was stretchin' the fac's, he went on so, but he didn't tell hafe the truth."

"Frank—who? What do you mean, Tobe Castor?" suspiciously demanded Shensen, who had been standing by, in a half-reverie.

"Frank Yates—one o' the boys as is with me, down yander."

"What has he to do with my Kate? What business has he to be praising her, and how did he ever come to see her?" angrily.

"Better ax yer da'ter. I on'y know from hearsay. 'Twas somethin' 'bout his helpin' the lady in a tussle 'th a 'Injun devil,' I know," shortly replied Tobe, seeing that, from some reason, Kate had not chosen to tell her father of the adventure.

"Kate, what is this? Why did you not tell me?" added Shensen, with evident suspicion.

"You were asleep when I came back, and I forgot it afterward. A carcajou sprang from a tree on Snowdrift's back, and I was flung off. Then the beast came at me, and the matter might have ended unpleasantly, only for this young man—a Mr. Yates, I believe Tobe said. He came up and changed places with me, killing the brute. He was surprised at finding a girl there, and asking me, I told him my name. That is the whole circumstance," tersely replied Mountain Kate.

Shensen seemed perplexed, and not altogether at ease, but then, with a gesture, he bade his daughter retire. As Kate glided away, he turned again toward Tobe and eyed him closely.

"Who is this Yates—that is, *what* is he? A professional trapper, like yourself?"

"No. He's on'y tryin' it this winter, fer fun, as I told ye before."

"Then he must be well off."

"So he is. His daddy's a big-bug o' St. Louis, an' Frank hes a fortin in his own right besides."

"He is single?"

"Sartin—else for why would he be out here?"

"Tell me just what he said about my girl—tell me all—every word."

"Why, he told us 'bout the scrimmage, an' then said she must be your da'ter—was ruther good-lookin'. That's about all he said," cautiously replied Castor, not liking the glisten of Shensen's eyes.

"I believe you are holding something back; but never mind now. If I had not resolved upon the course to follow, before, this would decide me. You must pack up and leave this place. Were you alone, you might stay, in welcome, for I have not forgotten the favor you once done me. But

I won't have any more such romantic adventures, filling the girl's head with nonsense."

"Thar wouldn't be 'casion fer any more ef it hedn't 'a' bin fer Frank," coolly retorted Castor.

"Never mind; of course I am grateful for that, but I won't have him presuming on his good luck. I have other views for Kate. But if he remained here, there would be the devil to pay, if only from contrariness. No, you must leave, and that at once," decisively added Shensen.

"You take a heap fer granted, 'pears to me. How do you know Frank hes any sech idee's? He's never see'd your gal but onc't."

"That is enough—yes, and too much. I tell you, man, that I won't risk it. I'll give you one week from this morning to leave this place in. If you are here then—"

"Wal—go on," coolly added Castor.

"If you are here then, I'll send my band after you. You know their style of working, and can guess the result."

"I've heerd tell of it. But you seem to think the fun 'd be all on one side."

"What! you don't mean to say that you will resist—that you are fool enough to dare a struggle with my band?" cried the astonished outlaw.

"I don't say as we will, but sech things hes happened. An' ef so be we did try it, be sure we'd make things lively fer you. The dug out is fire-proof. You'd hev to walk right up an' chop it down. Thar's three o' us—we've got thirty nine shots, 'thout stoppin' to load. You kin count up the odds yourself—they hain't so big as they mought be, ef they was bigger. But never mind thet, as you say, 'tain't likely 'at we'll ever hev to test it. Then you've made up your mind to thet?"

"Yes—one week. That is all. You can go or stay, just as you please. It matters little to me."

"Jest so. An' in thet week, you'll let us alone? You won't let no man rob our traps, an' sech like?"

"No, I'll give them their orders, and if any of them bother you, report them to me, and they shall be punished. But mind you, this is because you once saved my life. With any one else, I would not stoop to make terms. And even you

had best think well, before you depend too much on that gratitude. I've drawn the line; if you overstep it, don't blame me should you get hurt."

"Don't be skeered. Ef I step over it, it'll be 'th my eyes open, an' 'pendin' on myself, not on you. But it's gittin' late. Ef we've onderstood, I reckon I'll travel."

"Go—but remember. If you overstay the time, I would not give one pinch of dust for your lease of life."

"You said thet afore, an' I hain't fergot it yit. Good-by. I'll send Clem Barodyne back, soon's I git to the dug-out."

Tobe Castor descended the hill, and hastened back toward the hut, the careless look gone from his face, and a puzzled expression in its stead. The interview had ended much as he had anticipated.

He knew that Carl Shensen would keep his word in every respect, and that should he decide upon remaining, it would be at the peril of his life. On the whole, he had pretty much resolved to pull up stakes and change his location.

He had traversed nearly half the distance, when he fancied he saw the figure of a man dodging along the base of the hill to his right, though in the fast deepening shadows, he could not be certain. His doubts, however, were speedily terminated, though in a far from agreeable manner.

From the suspected point there shot out a bright flash, and mingled with the sharp report of a rifle, he could hear the vicious whistling of a ragged bullet hissing so close above his head that his cap was knocked to the ground. There could be no doubting as to what object the treacherous marksman had fired at.

Tobe, though undeniably brave, was not yet utterly devoid of prudence, and not knowing but that the enemy were in force, he dropped down and glided behind a small patch of plum brush, preparing his fire-arms for defense. But as minute after minute rolled by, without further sign of the enemy, he concluded there had been but one, who had fled on seeing his failure.

Acting upon this supposition, Tobe Castor arose and dashed toward the spot from whence had been sped the treacherous shot. No living being met his vision, and he knew that whoever had been there, had effected his escape, scot free.

"Durn the luck! Ef I'd on'y 'a' knowed it!" muttered the trapper, as he arose from the snow, baffled in his effort to read the sign, by the fast-dying light. "Wal, he owes me a shot, an' I may git even with the cuss yit. Reckon 'twas one o' them imps o' the old man, out on a scout. A Injun wouldn't 'a' bin alone."

Reasoning thus, Tobe Castor resumed his way, with increased haste, knowing that his friends would be anxious at his protracted absence. But before he had gone another mile, he came out face to face with both Taylor and Yates, who seemed not a little gratified at the meeting.

From first to last, that day seemed made up of surprises, coming rapidly, one after another. The greatest one—or rather, the one that caused Tobe the greatest surprise—was speedily revealed.

"What on airth be you fellers doin' out here?" he cried, when fully convinced of their identity. "Didn't you know better 'n to leave that cussed Clem Barodyne thar at the dug-out alone?"

"We didn't leave him there," shortly returned Tom.

"You didn't, eh?" echoed Tobe, in great astonishment.

"He escaped—got free, somehow."

"An' you two fellers watchin' him, with the door barred? Oh, *git* out! whar's the use in sech durned foolishness? Don't I know better?" impatiently uttered the trapper.

"It's true, Castor," put in Frank, "though we wasn't there at the time. An hour or so after you left, a herd of black-tail came down to the river below the dug-out, and began crossing. I ran out and shot one, hurting it so that it could barely keep afloat with the current. I followed down the bank, knowing it would catch on the driftwood at the shoal. It did, and when I had cut it up, I went back to the shanty to find the door open and both Taylor and the spy gone."

"I suppose I'm the one most to blame," said Taylor, in answer to Castor's glance of inquiry, "but I hadn't the slightest idea of his escaping. Frank had so badly frightened the deer that two of them turned back after he passed, and ran up past the hut. I fired, but must have missed, though I thought then he was hard hit. So I ran after them, with Turk, and before I knew it I was out of sight of the house."

I lost the one I was after, and sighting another, I tried to stalk it, so as to have something to show for my trouble. But I didn't succeed, and when I got back, the fellow had made off, somehow."

"How in thunder could he git ontied, 'thout help? I tied them strings, an' I'm keen to sw'ar thet he never slipped them off. *Somebody* must 'a' helped the cuss," doggedly muttered Tobe.

"Surely you don't suspect us? What object could we have had in setting free an enemy?" said Frank.

"No, I don't think you fellers did it. But *some* one must 'a' bin thar. Was you follerin' him when I met you?"

"No—that is, we heard a shot out here, and as he took his weapons, we feared he had met you unawares. So we ran out to see."

"It must 'a' bin him, then. The varmint meant well, but he overshot. Putt a air-hole through my cap 'stead o' my head, as he 'tended. Wal, I don't know as it matters much, anyhow. I wanted he should hear a little o' our talk, though, afore he went back, to sorter putt the old man on a false trail. I wouldn't keer, on'y I'd like to know how it happened—I would so!"

"Some of his friends must have been around when you captured him, and then watched their chance to set him free," suggested Taylor.

"By the way, what luck did you have with the old man, as you call him—Shensen?"

"Thar's the shanty—wait ontel we're gittin' some grub. Then we'll talk it over."

After the meal was finished, Castor related the substance of his interview with the outlaw chief, and then left the matter to the decision of his comrades.

"I say let's stick it out, in spite of the old fool," said Taylor, energetically. "I believe that it's half idle boasting, and if we only show a bold front, he won't dare to molest us. If he should, we three can hold our own in here, against twice his force. I say stay, and, if must be, fight the devils."

"I'm willing to risk it, if Tobe thinks there's a chance for us," quietly uttered Frank. "I'm no fonder of running than Tom is."

"Wal, we'll think it over. Thar's a week ahead o' us yit, an' who knows, somethin' may turn up to decide for us."

And so the matter rested for that night.

CHAPTER IV.

LOVE'S VAGARIES.

THAT night the dreams of Frank Yates were ludicrously complicated, partaking of both the ridiculous and pathetic. It is hardly necessary to add that Mountain Kate occupied a prominent position in the fantastic vision.

Toward morning one of those sudden changes in the atmosphere, for which the West is famous, took place, and the snow-crust quickly softened. At daybreak the feathery particles were falling fast and furiously, threatening a severe snow-storm.

Though this was nothing more than might naturally have been expected, at that season, the circumstance seemed to give Tobe Castor considerable uneasiness, so much so that his comrades could not but notice it.

"Must hurry up, boys, an' go look at your traps. There's no tellin' how long this pesky storm 'll last, an' we may be snowed in afore night. Ef ye see any game wuth the powder, knock it over, an' fotch it back."

"Why, you don't think there's any thing wrong, do you, Tobe?"

"Thar's no tellin'. Ef this keeps on, as it looks like, we may be snowed in—I hev know'd it to last a week—an' ef we're short o' grub, then we're played. It's ruther airly in the season, though, fer sech, an' it may cl'ar up afore any harm's did; but then it's best to be on the safe side," evasively replied Castor.

Frank Yates was not old enough trapper to realize the full extent of the peril in such a case, and when he set forth upon his usual rounds his mind was dwelling far more upon the fair Mountain Kate than upon the advice of his weather-wise comrade.

It was difficult walking, as the crust had melted so that his feet sunk through to the ground, the snow now reaching above his knees. But Frank completed his rounds, meeting with fair success, finding three beaver and one otter in his traps.

After having reset his traps, changing some of them to new "slides," and skinned his game, Frank strapped them to his back. While thus occupied, the sky had brightened, and the snow now came down in less profusion. The storm was nearly at an end, and Castor's fears proved without foundation.

Despite himself, Frank felt a little abashed as he struck up the river, toward the valley in which he had met Mountain Kate, though he stoutly declared that he believed it to be the most likely spot around for furnishing game. This apology, though mental, showed conclusively where his thoughts were.

Frank laughed faintly as he caught himself peering eagerly forward, when nearing the spot where the struggle had taken place. And yet he crouched down beneath the tree, waiting—for what, he scarcely dared think—until thoroughly chilled through.

Then, with a gloomy, peevish feeling, he arose and went back to the dug-out. And the next day the programme was the same, though as the storm had cleared, it was piercingly cold, and his vigil was kept by hastily striding to and fro over the thickening crust. The sleet of the night past had turned to a glare of ice upon the snow, hard enough to bear up under the weight of a horse.

During this time, the subject of their removal was little spoken of. Nothing had been fully decided upon, as yet, though the time of grace was rapidly rolling by.

The third day, as usual, found Frank at his post beneath the scrubby oak-tree, but now he no longer sought to cloak his real hopes. He could no longer deceive his own mind, and he knew that this strange maiden—this daughter of a criminal—was becoming very dear to his heart.

Not that he believed he loved her, as a man should the one he seeks to make his wife; instead, he attributed the growing restlessness to a desire to learn more of her strange life, and

to assure her that, if she would accept it, he was ready to help her flee to the States, where she could begin a new life. This was as far as he had ventured in analyzing his feelings, as yet.

The trapper's reverie was broken by the sound of hoof-strokes, and with the caution learned from Castor, Frank sprung back into the thicket, crouching low down, yet in a spot whence he could command a fair view of the valley, while being comparatively well screened himself. Strange as it may seem, he did not once imagine that the rider was Mountain Kate.

The strokes sounded closer, and were now coming directly up the valley. Then, through the brush, Frank caught a glimpse of something scarlet; the next moment his heart gave a wild bound, as he clearly recognized Mountain Kate, the one of whom he had been so busily thinking.

She dashed directly up to the oak-tree, and pausing, raised upright in the saddle. But then her uplifted arm fell, and a little exclamation, as of disappointment, broke from her lips, and her face flushed scarlet.

Frank felt pretty much, then, as we suppose one would the morning after "a jolly time with the boys," only his sensations were those of joy, not disgust. His brain reeled, and his eyes dimmed from the rush of blood, as he realized the pleasant truth.

Mountain Kate had not forgotten his last words, but had come to look for the note, and not finding it, was evidently not a little disappointed. That proved she had not forgotten him, as Frank had feared.

As soon as Yates could control his feelings, he arose and stepped forth from his covert. The maiden started and jerked her horse back at this sudden appearance, and half-drew a pistol before she recognized the young trapper.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Kate," hastily uttered Frank. "It is a friend."

"So I see—but you have a most uncomfortable mode of making your appearance. You fairly frightened my poor Snowdrift," and Mountain Kate bent her head low down, patting the mustang's neck as though extremely solicitous on its account.

"I heard hoof-strokes, and not knowing but it was an enemy, I dodged in there," explained Yates.

"Then you were—you saw me look for the note?"

"Yes, and I was de—that is, pleased, to notice your surprise at not finding one," stammered Frank, quailing before the bright eyes.

"Ah! that—see how I hurt my poor wrist on the rough bark. It made me cry out; did you notice it?" innocently returned Kate.

"Was that it?" and Frank's face fell. "I thought—that is—"

"Well, you thought—what?" mischievously asked Kate, settling herself more comfortably upon the saddle.

"I thought—well, there! It's no use trying to hide anything—I only make a miserable bolch of it. I thought you came here expecting a note, and that you were disappointed in not getting one," desperately uttered Yates.

Kate's brows lifted as though in surprise.

"Of course I felt disappointed, because I would then have to take this ride over again, or else break my word."

"And that was all? I had hoped it was something else."

"I do not understand you," and Kate played with Snow-drift's silken mane.

"You don't wish to, rather. But since I've went so far, I'll tell you all. I was in hopes—a fool for my pains, you may think—that you in some degree shared my own feelings. Their nature you may guess, when I say that for hours each day since we made that agreement, I have waited here in hopes of meeting you. I've thought of you so often, and found so much pleasure in remembering your promise, that I dared hope *you* would give it an occasional thought, too. Now are you angry at my plain speaking?"

"No—not angry. Why should I be?" and Mountain Kate glanced quickly at the young trapper's earnest face.

"I didn't know—it must seem very foolish to you. But the thought has been very pleasant to me—more so than I would dare tell you."

"And these thoughts kept you from suffering with the cold, while waiting and watching for the one who never came?" added Kate, mischievously.

"You laugh ; but since you are not offended, I can bear that. I often wonder at myself, but since that day, I have thought of little else than what you told me—I mean about your strange life. I thought I was of too purely selfish a nature to feel another's troubles so deeply."

"I don't think you're that. Your face is not a selfish one," said Kate, simply, as Frank paused. "But I'm sorry that what I said caused you troubled thoughts."

"It did, and yet it gave me a peculiar pleasure, too. There," and Frank laughed, though in a constrained manner. "You can guess how confused have been my thoughts. It's all contradiction. I don't know what's come over me."

"Tell me what were your thoughts about me—I mean your *real* thoughts—not idle compliments."

"You are not one to be complimented. The truth may sound like one ; but still it's the truth. Well, partly, I wondered that you, leading the life you say for so long, should have grown up to be what you are. Under such tuition, one would naturally look for a coarse, unwomanly, uncultivated, if not positively evil mind. Indeed, you are the very opposite of all this."

"Good, so far. Go on ; I am very highly entertained," laughed Kate," but with a slight quivering of the lips that told she was far from being so *nonchalant*, in reality.

"I thought, too, how distasteful all this must be to you, and wished there was some way by which it might be changed. You were created for a better and pleasanter life than the one you are now leading. Then, you would not only be happier yourself, but make others happy, and be both loved and respected."

"No ! You are amusing yourself at my expense !" angrily cried Kate, her eyes flashing. "I—the daughter of an outlaw—a murderer—a man for whose head a reward is offered—I, loved and respected ? No ! Every finger would be pointed at me in scorn—people would pass by on the other side, with words and looks of loathing. No, sir—hard and disagreeable as this life may be, it is still *free*. Here, in the wild mountains, or upon the wide, lonely prairies, I can live and sometimes forget what a blot I am upon Nature's face. At times I can even fancy that I have a soul to be saved —

that I am one of God's creatures. But there, my life would be crushed out of me by the bitter scorn and contempt that, of myself, I have done nothing to deserve."

Mountain Kate's anger suddenly died out, and she sat her horse pale and agitated, her eyes dimmed and her lips quivering. Frank felt an almost uncontrollable longing to comfort her—to clasp her to his breast; but then a glimmer of reason returned, and he restrained his feelings.

"It is not so bad as you imagine. You could get a place where the past would never be known. I know of one—but you will not be angry?"

"No. You mean well, though you talk of what can never be."

"I alluded to my own family. It is not so large now but there is room for another. You would be very welcome there."

"Tell me more about them," quietly uttered Kate.

"Besides father and mother, there is only my sister Flora left. She is about your age, and much like you, in form and face, though not so beautiful. She is not strong, and I sometimes fear she will be taken from us, as brother Charley was. She would love you, I know; she is so gentle, so good," quietly said Frank, his voice lowering.

"And you would see me—I, Mountain Kate, Carl Shensen's daughter—enter there in your happy home?"

"If you would go. Kate, listen to me. Would you do this if you had the *right* to go?"

Kate started and looked at him steadily, her great lustrous eyes glowing. Frank met her gaze firmly, though his breath quickened, and his lips twitched slightly.

"I do not understand you. Speak plainer," uttered the maiden.

"I will, though you may think me demented. I mean, will you go there as my wife?" earnestly added Frank.

"Ha! ha! A ludicrous ending to a dolorous theme!" laughed Kate, but there was an unnatural ring to her voice, that told she was not so greatly amused as her words would fain indicate.

"You refuse, then?"

"Yes—are you not delighted?"

"I might be, if I could really believe you saw such a jest in my words. But you only langh with your lips. I told you once I was a plain, blunt-spoken man. I can jest at times, but not in such a case as this. I am in deep earnest, now, and repeat what I said. I love you—will you be my wife?"

"And I repeat—no."

"Why not?"

"For a thousand reasons; one of which is that you don't love me in that way, if at all. You have let your sympathy outrun your judgment. In pitying my life, you fancy you love me. Then I don't love you, though I like you, I admit. You have spoken kindly to me, and seem to respect me. A woman, no matter how fallen or degraded she may be, never forgets one who treats her in that manner. I can not—I shall ever remember it, and shall always like and respect you for it. You will believe this, though you see we can never be any thing to each other more than friends?"

"Yes—since you say it. But you do not understand my heart as I do myself. I told you I love you; so I do. True, we have not been long acquainted—but what of that? Does it need a lifetime for one to learn how to love? Must one go through a regular routine before he can know his feelings? I don't think so. I believe that love can spring into existence at once, from a word, a look, in a breath of time and be no less pure and steadfast than that of a year's growth. I did not hope that *you* loved, and for that reason I hesitated. But what could I do? Leave the place without speaking? That is not my nature. If I had been given time—were matters situated other than as they are, I would have bided my time and sought to win your love. But I could not go away without telling you this."

"It would have been better if you had done so, perhaps—better for both," said Kate, a far-away look in her eyes, as her hand slowly smoothed Snowdrift's thick coat.

"It may be, but I can not think so. I do not ask you to love me all at once. That will come with time. I will teach you to love me, as I would have you. I can—I know it. All I ask is time and the opportunity. You shall never have cause to regret it. You will be freed from this life; you

will have a comfortable home, with one to care for you whose love will keep you from all trouble. All I ask is that you will promise to try and love me," earnestly added Frank, his face glowing with ardor.

"No; I can not leave my father. I am the only one that can control him in any thing. I could never forgive myself if I left him alone."

"You need not; I have enough for us all."

"Do you mean this? You would ask him to share this home, after what you must have heard about him?"

"For your sake, Kate, I would do more than that. If he will consent, he will be welcome."

"No, that would be too much. Under such heavy burdens your love would soon change to regret for your folly. No, once for all, it can not be. Please do not again allude to that subject. I am grateful—very grateful, but it can never come to pass."

"You will allow me to see your father about it? He may see the matter in a clearer light than you do," suggested Yates.

"No—no! He would be so angry, he would kill you at the hint! Promise me you will not, for my sake, if not for your own," cried Kate, agitatedly.

"Very well. Then I am to consider my hopes entirely in vain? You will not even give me a hope that you may change?"

"I could not, justly. Let the matter die out; it is better so. But, though I can not accept, I shall ever remember your friendly offer, and the one who was so generous and kind to me."

"Thank you, Kate. But don't misunderstand me. I have made no promise, nor will I. Though we part now, I have faith that we will meet again, and when we do, I will ask you the same question. It may be a year, or it may be two; but if we both live, I believe that I will yet succeed in making you love me."

"You are sanguine," said Kate, with a faint smile. "But time will tell. Now, seeing that the grave and important matters are settled, suppose we talk of what brought me here. Have you decided yet when you are to leave this

place?" she added, assuming her natural demeanor, though with visible effort.

"No, as I told you, my mind has been filled with other thoughts. I don't really know whether we will go or stay."

"You surely will not stay—it would be certain death."

"Perhaps not. We could make a stout fight in our 'dug-out.' However, it is as my comrades decide."

"Persuade them to go. You are the first man that I have seen, whom I could really respect. I would not have your blood upon my father's head, nor would I have you harm him. Believe me, I advise this for your own good."

"I will think it over and tell you to-morrow, at this place, and at the same hour—if you will meet me. You will come?"

"Yes. But first, can you trust that comrade of yours—I mean the dark one?"

"Taylor? trust him—why, what put that doubt into your mind?" cried Frank, astonished.

"I may be wrong, but I do not like his looks. He is one who would be a traitor to his own brother, if sufficient reward was offered. But there is more. Do you know how Clem Barodyne got free from your hut?"

"No—do you?"

"I suspect. I heard him laughing over it with father, and am almost sure he mentioned Taylor's name. Then twice since I have seen him talk with Barodyne—only to-day as I rode here, I saw them together. If true to you, he should be an enemy to Barodyne. I advise you to watch him. 'Twill do no harm, and may save you hurt, if he intends treachery."

"It is strange! Though I knew he was rather loose principled in some things, I thought him honest. What can he hope to gain by plotting against me? I can think of nothing," added Frank, thoughtfully.

"Well, I have warned you. And now I must go, else father may be anxious. To-morrow, then, at noon?"

"Yes—I shall be waiting."

Frank pressed his lips to the small hand extended, and then with a gay smile Mountain Kate rode away. Neither beheld the dark figure stealthily gliding back from the thicket, and when Frank turned to depart, the eavesdropper disappeared around the corner of the hill.

CHAPTER V.

HUNTED DOWN.

FRANK YATES walked slowly back toward the "dug-out," his brain teeming with busy thoughts, not alone concerning his rejection—for in that direction he still entertained hopes. He believed that his love would yet prevail, as he had plainly told Mountain Kate.

But her words relative to Frank Taylor gave him no little uneasiness. There was reason in them, or at least, circumstances seemed to justify a suspicion.

Frank had made the acquaintance of Taylor after leaving town, while steaming up the river. It seemed a mutual attraction, and when Taylor said he was rambling for pleasure, alone, the two had joined hands, and from that had come this venture, they falling in with Tobe Castor, at St. Joseph, where he was selecting his outfit.

Yates knew that his comrade drank, gambled and was rather reckless in some respects, but until now this had given him no uneasiness. Now, however, he began to doubt his new-found friend.

To his surprise, Frank found Taylor at the dug-out, though Castor was gone. As he gazed keenly upon him, something told Frank to bide his time, and say nothing concerning what he had heard, until after a consultation with Tobe.

"Here at last—I began to think you were out for all day," yawned Taylor, as Frank entered. "Feel any thing like taking a tramp?"

"What for?"

"Tobe said we'd better be looking up some game, as our stock was getting low. He's out now, and I said I'd wait for you."

"How long have you been waiting for me?" suddenly asked Yates.

"A couple of hours, I guess. Why?"

"Oh nothing," and Frank felt relieved.

If Tom had been waiting that long, then Kate must have mistaken another for him, talking to Clem Barodyne.

Frank changed his wet buffalo-skin moccasins for a dry pair, and then the two men set forth. For a time they kept together, but then separated, as by a wider range their object was more likely to be accomplished.

Frank was a good shot, and by closely heeding Castor's instructions, had already become quite a skillful hunter, and in a couple of hours' time, he had bagged two fine, fat deer. The first of these he had guarded from the wolves by attaching a rag to an upright stick, so it would flap in the wind.

The second he quickly butchered, wrapping the hind-quarters and saddle up in the hide, and then slung them over his shoulders. It was getting late, and he knew that before he could get back to the dug-out, it would be night, as the hunt had led him several miles away.

"What in thunder has got into the wolves, to-day, I wonder?" muttered Yates, as he left the spot. "I never knew them to act so before. It can't be that the brutes mean to attack me!"

There seemed sufficient reason for this surprise in the actions of several gaunt monsters that he had noticed for some time, though they had thus far kept at long rifle-range. They seemed to be *trailing him*—to follow his windings, whichever way he turned.

What still further increased the young trapper's wonder, was that among them he could distinguish more than one coyote—those slinking, cowardly brutes; but now they evinced far more boldness than he deemed them capable of showing. With them, he also saw the large gray "mountain-wolf," that, when pressed by hunger, is really a formidable antagonist.

But thus far in his experience, until now, they were wont to flee from a man, and more than one hour had he vainly spent in trying to get within gun-shot of them. A dozen times during the hunt Frank could have shot one, but that he was after more profitable game.

Occasionally his grizzly followers would pause and utter a long-drawn howl, and as the young trapper heard it answered

back from more than one direction, he instinctively quickened his pace, and, though he strove to cast it off, a feeling of uneasiness gained upon him.

"Bah! you're a fool, Frank Yates," he muttered in self-disgust. "They only smell the blood. An army of them wouldn't dare attack a man at this time o' year. Game is too plenty for that, yet."

But still he cast more than one doubting glance behind him, and then carefully inspected his pistols. As the shadows grew deeper, he hastened on, while the wolf-howls still came from behind him, at shorter intervals, mingled with the yelping bark of the coyotes.

The sun had some time set, and the new moon was up. The cloudless sky was thickly studded with stars, and their bright light over the snow-covered ground rendered objects in the open, almost as distinct as at noon-day.

In this fact Frank saw a safeguard. Strangely emboldened as the wolves seemed, the clear light might frighten them from the attack gloom would invite.

"Only that they'd laugh at me for being such a coward, I'd drop this bait. But I'd never hear the last of it, if I did, though. Tobe would rake me most unmercifully. No—if they want it, they must fight for it," muttered Yates, determinedly.

It did seem as though the fresh meat was the attraction. The wolves crept gradually closer, sending forth their lugubrious howls in louder chorus.

Louder, because their numbers were increasing. Already Frank could count a dozen or more of the slinking brutes. And still, from afar off, he could distinguish the growing howls and yelps that told of more coming.

Closer they came, snarling and snapping viciously at each other, their long fangs glittering in the clear light, howling, yelping and barking in hideous chorus. And the young trapper was yet fully three miles from shelter.

The prairie was level and bare. Not a tree—scarce a shrub waist high—was in sight, unless upon the far-away hills. The glistening snow-crust was unbroken by any hollow or gully.

And yet the trapper did not fully appreciate his peril. In

stead of fear, the continuous uproar behind him roused his anger. He was strongly tempted to turn and fire into the pack, but refrained, lest a taste of blood should embolden them to attack him in force.

"Curse the brutes!" gritted Yates, as he dropped the meat and unslung his rifle. "I'll silence one throat, at all risks!"

As he spoke, the rifle cracked, and the foremost, a huge, gaunt monster, fell in a heap, with a yelp of pain. But scarcely had he fired the shot, than Frank regretted his precipitancy.

Instead of cowing them, as he thought would be the case, the death-shot roused them to fury. And then, for the first time, he fairly realized his imminent peril.

With fiendish, snarling yells, the brutes sprung in a body upon their dying brother, and there seemed a solid mass of writhing life, from which a terrible din arose. As if a signal for others, the prairie seemed alive with their yelps, and the snow surface became spotted as their dusky forms sped toward the carnival.

But all could not get at the one wolf, and as Frank loaded his rifle, he saw several more crouching upon their bellies, crawling toward him, their white fangs glistening, their eyes glowing like fireballs. As he half stooped to pick up the meat, they sprung toward him.

With a loud yell Yates rose erect and flung up his hands. But the grisly demons did not take to flight. Instead they only paused, uttering their dismal howls.

Frank no longer gave thought to his game, but bitterly cursed his folly in not abandoning it while there was yet time. He knew now that his life was in great peril: that a race for life or a desperate struggle was inevitable.

And what could his single arm avail against this host—for host it was rapidly becoming, as new arrivals momentarily joined their brethren. Desperate, he slung his rifle over his shoulder, and drew a revolver in either hand.

Upon those twelve shots rested his life. Already the wolves counted thrice that number, but perhaps he could beat them off until reaching the dug-out, or until his friends should come to his rescue.

Knowing his danger, Frank still retained his presence of

mind, and closely counted the chances for and against him. He knew that if he could keep from being surrounded he might gain safety; otherwise he must quickly be overpowered.

These thoughts flashed through his mind, even as the wolves sprung forward with their snarling cries, joined now by those who had so deftly picked the bones of the one who had so lately been their leader. At their second leap, the trapper fired one shot.

A victim fell—out of that crowded mass, a different result could not well be, and a wound answered as well as a death-blow. And as before, the unhurt sprung upon the helpless, in a body.

Frank turned and fled at top speed. It was by tactics like this that he hoped to escape.

For that reason he had only fired one shot. More would have lessened his chances without protracting the end a moment longer. Two bodies would have been devoured as quickly as one by that ravening horde.

As before, there were some crowded away from the cannibal feast. As before, they uttered their yelping howls, and sprung after the fleeing trapper.

Frank heard the warning cries, and though his heart beat quicker, and his cheeks turned pale, he did not lose his presence of mind, nor forget that his life in a manner depended upon his coolness and steadiness of nerve.

As before, he faced the ravening brutes. His arm straightened out, and then with the bright flash and sharp report, a bullet once more tore through the hideous group. Again came the terrific struggle—brother eating brother.

Again Frank turned to flee, but a sharp cry broke from his lips, and he sprung quickly aside, as if by instinct. Even as he did so, a huge gray form filled the spot he had so lately occupied.

A moment's hesitation must have sealed the young trapper's fate. The hungry wolf was quivering for the deadly leap; beyond were still others, gliding nearer, with furious howls.

And the redoubled snarling, yelling and scuffling around the spot where had fallen the second wolf, but too plainly

told the hunted trapper that this mite was well-nigh devoured.

Once more the trusty pistol spoke, and with a horrible snarl, the stricken monster fell almost at the feet of its destroyer. The survivors darted forward quick as light, their attention divided between the living and the dead.

Frank leaped backward, and fired once more; then, without waiting to note the effect of his aim, he turned and fled at top speed. A sickening dread had seized upon his heart, and for a moment he completely lost his presence of mind.

But then, as he heard the furious snarls behind him, telling that the majority of the wolves were still worrying over their barbarous feast, Frank, with a desperate effort, chased the feeling of terror from his heart, encouraging himself in the hope of eventual escape, by his success thus far.

He knew that on such a still night, in that clear atmosphere, sound traveled far, and he believed that his friends would hasten to his rescue without delay. Unless they should, he felt that he must soon fail.

The great strain upon his mind weakened him even more than had the bodily exertion. His limbs grew unsteady and trembled beneath him, like those of one greatly fatigued, while more than once his feet slipped upon the frozen snow.

As the continuous yelping behind told that the wolves were again after him, a long, shrill yell broke from Frank's lips. Though this was uttered to reach the ears of his comrades, it had one beneficial result.

A large gray brute had been crouching down close to the snow, almost directly in the path of the young trapper, and it was even preparing for the deadly leap that would have ended the struggle at once. But at the wild screech it sprang aside with an affrighted snarl, and then fell into the ranks of those coming up.

Frank turned, and again his pistol spoke. But to his horror, only a few of the grisly monsters paused over the dying wolf, while with fierce snarls and yells the others rushed madly on, their powerful jaws clashing together with a terrible significance.

Another shot—another foe the less; but the others still

came on. And Frank's first pistol was empty! The crisis had come!

Frank raised his voice and shouted, screamed and hooted until it seemed as though his lungs must burst, while his second pistol added its mite to the frightful din. At this the wolves hesitated—at the second shot they paused, though still sending up their lugubrious howls, now more terrible, more deadly in its intensity.

But as Frank quickly glanced around, his heart chilled. He believed that he was doomed. There was no further retreat.

Before, behind, upon either side of him, were the crouching forms, the fiery eyes and the clashing fangs. A circle of leath, he stood in the center, despairing and heart-sick.

He listened in hopes of something telling help was nigh. But nothing met his ears save the horrible sounds of the maddened wolves.

It could not long remain thus. Though evidently awed by his screams, the beasts were skulking nearer, licking their dripping jaws in anticipation of the horrible feast that seemed indubitably theirs.

Then a sudden change came over Frank. His pale cheek flushed, his eyes glowed and his breath came hot and fast.

He knew that to remain still would be equivalent to death—he felt that he was doomed, but with that thought came a fierce, uncontrollable desire for vengeance. He no longer feared the wolves—that point had past.

A quick wrench broke the strap that confined the rifle to his shoulders. Then with it in one hand, he sprung forward upon those nearest him, with a hoarse, unnatural howl.

Quickly the remaining chambers were emptied, and then the useless weapon was flung fiercely into the shrinking flock. Uttering hoarse, angry cries, the maddened trapper clubbed his rifle and rushed to close quarters.

Those in front shrunk back, those behind him skulked close. Round and round turned Frank, dealing blows here and there, sometimes with fatal effect, but oftener avoided by the nimble brutes.

Then one sprung upon him from behind, and the shock caused Yates to stagger to his knees. At this the entire pack

seemed emboldened, and swarmed forward, rending the air with their horrible snarls and howls.

But the trapper was not yet conquered, though the shock had hurled the rifle from his grasp. Though the wolf still clung to his shoulder, Frank drew his knife and with one fierce slash, forced himself from the monster.

But then the others closed in upon him. The blood-stained knife swept here and there, up and down, to the right and left, wielded by a strong arm, nerved by desperation.

Then, high above the furious din, came a new sound—or rather combination of sounds. The wolves shrunk back in momentary affright, and Yates, his clothing torn into shreds and his skin stained with blood, sprung to his feet.

The deep, angry bay; the huge, muscular form that sprung into the midst of the crowded animals; the sharp report—the hoarse voice of a white man, all told Frank that assistance had come, and with one exultant cheer, he leaped forward, mad, half crazed, and as one huge monster sprung at his throat, it was crushed to the frozen snow with a giant grip and literally disembowled.

“At ’em, Frank! Stan’ up, Frank, an’ you’re all right!” yelled Tobe Castor as he came bounding forward, and then his quick repeating shots drove back the wolves in dismay.

“Just in time, Tobe,” gasped Yates. “I was down and ’most gone!”

“Never mind now—pick up your weepins an’ be loadin’ ’em, while I keep the varmints back. Quick! we may need ’em yit!” cried Castor, as with clubbed rifle he rushed before his young comrade. “Tom—whar in blazes be ye?” he added, angrily.

The next moment Taylor came up limping, and then his weapons completed the repulse. With lugubrious howls, the wolves turned and fled, leaving the ground covered with their dead and dying.

“Come—load up in a hurry. We must be goin’. Them imps ’ll gather again, though what’s got into ’em, *I* cain’t see. Anyhow, the quicker we git back to the dug-out, the better.”

“I don’t think—I’m tired out—I can’t—” faltered Frank, as he staggered and would have fallen to the ground, had not Castor caught him.

"You're hurt—say you ain't hurt, Frank, lad?" anxiously cried the trapper.

"No—I don't think so. I'm tired—so tired!" muttered the young man, as he grew a dead weight upon Castor's arm.

"Come, Taylor, ketch hold o' his t'other arm, thar, an' help me. We mustn't stop here—jest lis'en to them yelpin's! Thar—now keep step."

In this manner they progressed with tolerable speed, and before the dug-out was reached, Frank's consciousness returned. He had partially swooned, from over-exertion of both body and mind.

Though the air was rent with their discordant yelps and howlings, as the wolves seemed gathering in force, the trappers were not again molested, though, perhaps, 'twas fortunate their quarters were no further away. Even Tobe Castor gave vent to a sigh of relief, as he closed the slab door behind him.

Frank sunk wearily down upon his bunk, weak and trembling. The reaction from such intense excitement, made the strong man as helpless as a child.

"Tom, you brile a bit o' thet meat, an' make some coffee—strong enough to bounce a iron wedge. Ef we don't mind, we'll hev the boy down on our han's, sick. Here, Frank, raise your head, so's I kin strip your duds off."

"I'm not a baby, Tobe," laughed Frank.

"'Bey orders, *you*. I've got the 'vantage, now, an' kin wallop ye, ef you don't mind. Hyste up your foot—thar. Now you kin—Ge-mently to thunderation!" and Tobe stared aghast at the young man, holding in one hand the buffalo moccasin.

"What now—what's the matter, Tobe?" asked Frank, partially roused from his apathy by the astonished tone of the trapper.

"I should think it was—thet's jest what I think—I do, by ge-mineezers!"

"Are you crazy?"

"Hold on—let me ax *you* thet. Be *you* done gone crazy? Hain't lost no fortin', nor bin crossed in love, hev ye? Hain't gittin' so old thet life's too durned much bother to live, is it? Then what on airth hev ve bin doin'? What in thunder do

ye mean? *Thet's* what I want to know," spluttered Castor, rising erect, and gesticulating with the buffalo moccasin, evidently greatly astonished by some discovery.

"I'm too tired to enjoy your joke, Tobe. Please put it off until morning, I would rather sleep, now," impatiently uttered Yates.

"Wait a bit. Then you didn't do it?"

"Do what?"

"Putt *asafedity* on the bottom o' your moccasins?"

"What!"

"Smell thar—its asafedity, fer money. Did you put it thar?"

"Did I—am I a fool?" cried Yates, now fully aroused. "No—I never even dreamed of such a thing!"

"But somebody did—it couldn't 'a' rubbed itself thar, could it? It was the smell o' thet which sot the varmints so f'erce an' wild. Thank your stars, boy, thet you're alive an' here, now. I wouldn't resk the chances over ag'in in your place, fer all the pelts in the world!" solemnly uttered Tobe.

"Somebody—Tom Taylor, can you tell me who did this?" suddenly cried Frank, as the words of Mountain Kate flashed upon his memory.

"I—why, what do you mean?" and the dark trapper sprung to his feet. "Do you accuse—"

"No, I don't accuse you, yet, though I honestly believe you did do it," boldly added Frank.

"How—you must—"

"Hold! thar—no ye don't, now," and Tobe Castor flashed forth his knife. "None o' thet—not ef I know's it. Ef ye must try the tools, take me—don't pitch onto a sick man."

"Let him keep his foul hints to himself, then," muttered Taylor, sullenly, yet shrinking from before the threatening trapper. "What have I done to deserve such treatment from him? What object could I have in getting him killed by the wolves? Bah! the man's a fool, and I'm another for noticing his ravings."

"You're hafe right—ef not more so. But look to thet coffee. We'll settle all this in the mornin'. You swallow this, lad, an' then you go to sleep. We'll hear your reasons fer sayin' what you did, a'ter you've rested. Surely you must hev some grounds fer sech talk, or you'd 'a' kept still?"

"I have. But now good-night."

However, Tobe Castor did not close his eyes that night. He sat beside the bunk of Yates, moodily pondering over his strange discovery, and upon the no less startling words of the young trapper.

Who had rubbed the asafetida upon the moccasins?

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAITOR.

IN the morning the young trapper was himself again, though feeling weak and somewhat stiff from his over-exertion. Taylor was sullen and taciturn, not speaking unless first addressed.

"Now, Frank," said Tobe, as the trio sat eating their morning's meal, "I s'pose you 'member what you said las' night, 'bout thet asafedity?"

"Yes, I remember."

"You still stick to it thet Tom putt the stuff on?"

"I believe so—though I have no direct proof. There—you can't frighten me with your ugly looks, Tom Taylor. If you are innocent, I am ready to ask your pardon, but if I find that you *did* do it, I'll kill you as I would one of the wolves that chased me last night."

"Hold on—now don't git your back up like thet, or dog my cats ef I don't take a hand in myself, an' clean ye both out. Frank, tell us your reasons."

Yates clearly detailed what Mountain Kate had said regarding Taylor and Barodyne. Castor looked grave.

"It's a lie—I have never spoken one word with him since he was here. Why should I have set him free? What could I possibly gain by that?" cried Taylor, hotly.

"Easy—take it cool, Tom. But the asafedity—how kem it on them things?"

"How should I know? Why not accuse you, as well as I?"

"Somebody putt it on. I didn't—then who *did*?"

"Either himself—one in love will do queer things some-

times," sneered Taylor, "or, how do you know that Barodyne, as you call him, didn't do it before he left, for spite? That is more likely than that I should do it, despite what this marvelously acute lady declares."

"Thar is somethin' in thet," and Tobe turned toward Frank, giving a meaning wink, that Taylor did not see. "I b'lieve Clem must 'a' did it, Frank. It's jest like the cuss. As Tom says, what could *he* gain by it? I guess we'd better let it drop at thet."

"I'm willing. If I am wrong, Tom, I ask your pardon. But there seemed no other solution, and Kate was so positive she saw you with Barodyne that—"

"Say no more, Frank; let it drop. You'll find out some of these days how you wronged me," uttered Taylor, cordially, as he outstretched his hand.

"Thet's more like it. But we must git to work. Shell I look to your traps, Frank?"

"No—I'll go. I'm all right; only a little stiff, and these scratches pain me some. I can manage, by taking my time," quickly returned Frank, for the promised interview with Mountain Kate was not to be missed.

Taylor smiled disagreeably as he glanced toward the young trapper. But without any further remarks, he prepared for his daily rounds.

Leaving Turk at the dug-out on guard, the three men separated and each proceeded toward his traps. That day was destined to be an eventful one for each one of the trio, but first we will trace those circumstances more particularly concerning Tobe Castor.

Tobe was far from being easy in his mind, and after crossing the river, he proceeded more slowly through the silently-falling snow, his brain teeming with busy and conflicting thoughts.

First there were the threats of Carl Shensen, and the rapidly approaching end of grace. But what most troubled him was this last discovery: that of the drugged moccasins.

Though he had suggested Clem Barodyne, it was done merely for a blind, for he knew how very improbable it was that he had thought of such a revenge, at the time of his hurried escape, at least.

Tobe suspected Tom Taylor, though puzzled to guess why he should be a traitor. What could he gain by such a course? Apparently nothing.

These thoughts prevented Tobe from displaying his usual caution, and several significant items were overlooked, that, had his senses been fully upon the alert, would have guarded him against what followed.

The first half-dozen traps visited were relieved of such game as had been caught, Tobe burying it beneath the snow until his return. At the next point, Tobe was suddenly and not altogether agreeably roused from his meditations.

The trap was gone!

Under certain circumstances this would only have caused chagrin, not alarm. But a single glance showed Castor that human hands had been at work.

"Some durned thief!" muttered Castor, as he sprung to land and crouched down behind a bush, unslinging his rifle as he did so. "Thar lays the stake, pulled up—but whar's the trap? Durned ef I don't find out. Ef it's one o' the old man's gang, I'll plug the varmint ef I hev to foller him cl'ar home!"

Each beaver-trap has attached a short, stout chain, at the end of which is a medium-sized iron ring. A sharpened stake is thrust through this, and then driven into the ground.

This stake was now lying out in full view upon the snow-covered ground, but the chain was not attached.

Tobe glided stealthily out from the river-bank, and began circling around the spot, carefully searching for sign, at the same time keeping on guard against an ambushed shot. The light snow was now falling thickly, and objects at a distance were rendered indistinct.

Castor gained the water's edge, without discovering any thing suspicious, and then paused to deliberate.

"Must be one o' them. A Injun would 'a' hid fer a shot at the feller what kem to look a'ter the traps. Then he's gone back to the randevoo, an' I'm goin' thar a'ter him. The old man—though mean a plenty, sometimes—ain't the feller to chaw his words, an' I'm goin' to hev thet trap. A number two, Newhouse, ain't so easy picked up now'days."

Assuring himself that his weapons were in order for im-

mediate service, Castor started up the river at a more rapid rate, though still upon the keen alert. The stream was here too deep for fording, though a comparatively safe passage might be had not more than a half-mile distant.

Suddenly Tobe uttered a little cry, and paused, with a rapid glance before him. He saw where the trap-thief had left the river bed, and struck along parallel with its course.

The fresh snow was now several inches in depth, and still falling, though but thinly. Upon this substance the thief had left a plain and broad trail.

"Them's him—an' made not a hafe hour sence, nuther," muttered Tobe, as he glided forward and stooped over the partially filled tracks. "Two o' the varmints, by ge-mently! Durn the luck! ef they war on'y cl'ar, I'd know better what to do. Reckon, though, it's the old man's hoofs."

As Tobe neared the ford, he became still more cautious, not knowing but that an enemy might be lying in wait. It was a rule with him to guard against every possible contingency.

"*Ge-mently!*"

The word broke from Castor's lips as if involuntarily, and then he fell heavily forward upon his face. Only for one circumstance it might have been supposed that he had merely stumbled.

From the dense plum thicket that lined the river bank at a point some two score yards above where the trapper had stood, there came the sound of one or more rifle-shots, and through the falling snow could faintly be discerned a curling smoke wreath.

Simultaneous with the trapper's fall a shrill, exultant whoop echoed from the covert, and then two dusky forms sprung out into view, rushing hastily toward their prey. Tobe Castor had walked blindly into an ambush.

Side by side the two figures dashed toward the motionless trapper, and the violent exertion, dislodging the clinging snow from their trappings, showed them to be Indians. That they had no doubt regarding the accuracy of their aim was plain, but they were speedily awakened to the truth.

The prostrate figure suddenly arose to its knees—an arm shot out, and then at the revolver's crack, one of the red-skins

sprung convulsively into the air, uttering a horrible cry of death-agony, as he fell bleeding to the snow-covered ground. His comrade paused, with a little cry of wondering dismay.

Tobe sprung erect, firing again as he did so, but his foot slipped, and he fell prostrate, the pistol flying from his hand. The discharged bullet hissed harmlessly past the red-skin's head.

Before Castor could recover himself, the Indian was upon him. Too experienced to await another shot, the savage rushed to close quarters, with drawn knife.

Tobe, though taken at a disadvantage, was now in his element. More than once in his life he had been in a somewhat similar situation, through which his skill and address had ever carried him safely.

As the red-skin delivered a venomous thrust, Castor rolled quickly aside, and with an adroit jerk, caused the Indian to fall, though partially on top. Then, grappling, the struggle for mastery, in which defeat meant death, began.

The Indian was young, active and muscular, and Castor found himself in a position of real peril. His hands were unarmed; the other held a knife.

As the Indian raised his knife for a stroke, Tobe promptly clutched his wrist, and with a strenuous effort, strove to wrest the weapon free. It required the utmost strength of the savage, to prevent this.

Then, throwing his entire power into the effort, Castor whirled the red-skin over, and breaking free from his left hand, sprung to his feet. Before his bewildered antagonist could arise, Tobe drew his second pistol, and with its report, the strife was ended.

"Turn about's fair play," muttered the trapper, as he hastily secured his rifle, and then glanced hurriedly around him. "They each had a shot at me, an' if I hadn't fell jest in time, they'd 'a' raised my ha'r, for shore!"

The quick eye of the trapper had indeed saved his life. Catching a glimpse of a figure among the brush, as it leveled a rifle, he had dropped to the ground, just in time to escape the death missiles that otherwise would have pierced his brain.

"It was them that stole the trap, them—not the old man's

boys," and Tobe bent curiously over the last fallen Indian "Cheyenne, by ge-mently! Thar must be more on 'em nigh. These two wouldn't 'a' got so fur north, *alone*, this time o year. *Durn* the luck! What atween these an' them, with the white devils, things is gittln' purty much mixed up!"

Tobe set out and made a rapid but thorough search around the vicinity, but found nothing to denote the proximity of other foes. In the thicket from whence the Indians had fired, he found the stolen trap, and with a grim chuckle, slung it upon his back.

Returning to where lay his two victims, Castor cut a hole through the snow-crust, and thrust the bodies into it, closing the opening tightly, after which he covered up all traces of the blood. Though appearing ill at ease, and in haste to be gone, the trapper made thorough work of this, for by that means alone might he hope to throw off the avengers of blood.

"Thar! The snow'll soon blot out the tracks. Ef they do find the karkidges, they won't know who did it. Better set this trap, an' then fer the dug-out. Ef the reds find it empty, they'll go fer the plunder like a blind 'possum fer a pow-pow!"

An hour later found Tobe Castor crossing the river abreast the "dug-out." He had carefully reconnoitered the premises, but at that distance, could see nothing out of the way.

With a sure foot, Tobe crossed on the slim, swaying bridge, formed by felling a tall cottonwood that reached from bank to bank. A puzzled look rested upon the face of the trapper as he neared the cabin.

"Whar's the purp? Broke loose, I wonder? 'Tain't like him—but whar's the use? Every thin' goes contrairy to-day—sorter starn-fo'most like. Cain't calc'late on nothin', sca'ce-ly. 'Nough to mix a feller up all over—won't know my own name, fust thing, ef it goes on so. Thar!"

While speaking, or rather grumbling, Castor had reached the dug-out, and though the snow-surface was broken and uneven, a keen glance seemed to satisfy him that all was right, as yet. The noiseless flakes were still falling, and the tracks might have been made early in the morning, as they were partially filled.

Tobe saw that the door was secured in the same manner as he had left it, and that allayed his suspicions. One after another he pushed in two blocks close beside the door, and thrusting in a hand, he pulled out the stout pins that held the door in place.

Still the trapper displayed caution. A kick swung the door open, and with ready revolver he glanced swiftly around the room. But no living object met his gaze.

"All's hunky, so fur, anyhow," and Tobe stepped inside, closing the door, and thrusting the pins in their places. "Reckon I was skeered at nothin', a'ter all!"

While thus occupied, his back was turned toward the bunks upon the further side of the dug-out. Even as he muttered this assurance, a pile of robes and skins were uplifted noiselessly, and two men stepped lightly to the ground, the right hand of each clasping a revolver, though by the barrel, not stock.

They crouched as if about to spring upon the unsuspecting trapper, with weapons uplifted, and every nerve tensely strung. Their features were deeply imprinted with hatred and revenge; their eyes, in the semi-darkness, burned with a lurid glow, akin to that which marks the orbs of wild beasts.

The fate of the trapper seemed inevitable. And yet a simple circumstance put him upon his guard.

As the second man—by far the heavier—stepped to the ground—a pole of the bunk creaked; faintly, but yet loud enough for the experienced trapper. On that still, windless day, this fact was sufficient to awaken suspicion.

Castor wheeled around, quick as thought, as the creaking caught his ear, and one hand dropped to his knife-hilt, as by instinct. His eyes were still slightly dazzled by the snow outside, and the two figures were but dimly seen; their actions, however, plainly showed them to be enemies.

As the trapper wheeled, the two men uttered simultaneous cries and sprung forward, their heavy pistols cutting the thin air with venomous force. But Castor matched them fully in quickness.

Abruptly crouching, only one of the pistol-butts struck him, and that in a glancing manner, merely stinging his left arm.

The force of his unresisted stroke caused the second man to stumble forward, and he fell heavily against the trapper's form.

A quick flashing—a peculiar, gritting sound—a broken curse, ending in a deep, hollow groan; then the larger of the assassins sunk to the floor, his left breast covered with the life-blood that spouted from the ghastly cut, where Castor's knife had sunk home.

All this had passed in a twinkling. Scarcely a breath had been drawn from the first rush, before Tobe Castor whirled upon his second antagonist, without trying to regain the knife that, wedged in betwixt the severed bone, had been wrenched from his hand as the stricken man fell.

A ray of light from without fell athwart the face of the second assassin. A cry broke from the trapper's lips, as he recognized the features.

"Tom Taylor!"

"Yes—take that, curse you!" gritted the detected traitor as he aimed a vicious blow at the head of the astonished trapper.

But Tobe proved equal to the emergency. Taylor's wrist struck heavily upon the hunter's forearm, the pistol dropping from his benumbed fingers.

Then Castor had him by the throat, and both fell to the ground together. The struggle was not of long duration, for Tobe, now thoroughly aroused, put forth his utmost powers.

"Let up, Tobe—it was all a joke. Let up, man—you'll choke me to death!" gasped Taylor, still struggling desperately, though fruitlessly, to cast off the trapper, whose bony fingers were curled tightly around his throat.

"A durned nice joke—lots o' fun, ain't it? But you've got to see it through, now, sence you begun it. Quit your pesky kickin'—the wuss you kick the wuss I'll use ye. Lay still, or I'll squeeze your gullet tighter 'n thet, a durned sight," muttered Tobe, his eyes glowing.

Taylor was indeed in a pitiable condition. Nearly strangled, he ceased to struggle and lay helpless beneath his antagonist.

Tobe partially arose, and with a strip of skin, soon bound the traitor securely. Then he turned toward the still figure of the man he had first struck.

A low whistle of astonishment broke from his lips as he turned the corpse so the light fell athwart the distorted features. It was that of an old acquaintance.

"Clem Barodyne, by ge-lory! So—I thunk as much. Tom Taylor, ye pesky sarpint, be ye awake?"

"No thanks to you," growled the traitor, his voice husky and strained. "You nearly killed me!"

"Ef I hed, 'twould on'y 'a' bin what you meant to sarve me with. When a feller hes two varmint atop o' him, he don't gen'ally stop to count how hard he hits. But look here—what does this all mean, anyhow?"

"'Twas only a joke."

"Don't lie so—don't. Makes me sleepy, it does. Sounds sneakin', too. What hed I ever did to you, thet you should jine 'th Clem to double teams on me? Hain't I al'ays used you like a white man?"

"No, you haven't. You've been hinting dirty things at me for the past week."

"Hintin' wuss'n this trick?"

"Blame yourself!"

"All right—sence you say so. But tell me what you and Clem meant, anyhow?"

"To take you prisoner—Barodyne wanted to shoot you—cuss my folly in saying against it!"

"For why? Did the old man hev any thin' to do with it?" eagerly.

Taylor laughed tauntingly, but did not reply in words. Castor gazed keenly down upon the villain.

"I don't b'lieve it. It's jest some o' you two's deviltry. I know now how Clem got loose. An' I know too whar thet asafedity kem from. *You* did 'em both."

"I did—make the worst of it!"

"What 'd he give you fer lettin' him loose?"

"Nothing. I did it for old acquaintance sake."

"So! I thought mighty queer thet sech a pesky coward as you be should speak out so bold fer stickin' it out here. You knowed you was safe, or you'd 'a' run like a jack-rabbit!"

"Untie my hands, and I'll show you if I am a coward!"

"Not much. You've got to stay thar until Frank gits

back. Thar's thet asafedity job yit. Mebbe he'd like to ax you somethin' 'bout it, fust."

"You'll get tired waiting for him, I guess," laughed Taylor, significantly.

"What's that—what do you mean?"

"Nothing," was the short reply, and the traitor bit his lips as though conscious of a false move.

Tobe arose and took down a thoroughly seasoned wiping stick. As he tested its elasticity, Taylor changed color.

"What're you going to do with that?" he demanded.

"I don't want to hurt ye, Tom, I think too much o' you fer thet; but I reckon you'd better tell me what I ax. I'll play school-teacher, ef ye don't. Tell me what you meant 'bout Frank," slowly uttered Tobe.

"Don't hit me with that—don't do it! Better think twice—don't hit me!" gritted Taylor, his eyes glowing venomously.

"Wuss'n a copperhead, you be. S'pose I do hit ye—what'll ye do 'bout it?"

"I'll kill you," quietly.

"Mebbe you won't hev thet chaine. Don't look much like it now. But I *will* ef you *don't*. *Why'll* I git tired afore Frank comes?"

"Because he *can't* come."

"*Why*—you hain't—"

"No, I haven't touched him. But I won't say any more. Do as you please. But you had better kill me at once, if you strike me, I warn you."

"Look here, Tom Taylor. You know me. Did I ever lie to you? No. I al'ays keep my word. Then lis'en. Ef you've hurt Frank, or hed him hurt, better say your good-by now, fer when I find it out, you won't hev time. So sure as you lay thar, I'll kill you. Onderstand?"

The traitor did not reply, though his bronzed cheek turned a shade paler. He read a deadly truth in the gleaming gray eyes fixed upon him. He knew that this was no idle threat.

"All right. I see you onderstand. You kin tell me or not, jest as you please. I'll find out afore night, anyhow. Ef he comes back safe, all right; ef not—then you'll hev to settle 'th *me*."

Castor tested the traitor's bonds once more, and then added

a secure gag. Lifting the captive on one of the bunks, he covered him with robes, and then carefully inspected the condition of his weapons.

Fastening the door behind him, he left the "dug-out." An uneasy expression rested upon his features, for he dreaded the worst.

CHAPTER VII.

FRANK CHOOSES.

THE snowstorm gave Frank Yates a little uneasiness, for he feared lest it should deter Mountain Kate from keeping the appointment at the Lone Oak. His mind was occupied far more with thoughts of what he could say to change her decision, than on his traps, though each of these were visited and attended to.

Though he necessarily worked slow, it was yet a full hour before the designated time when Frank turned into the little valley. His eyes were fixed upon the snow, an expression of conflicting hope and doubt resting upon his face.

The soft snow bore traces of a horse's hoofs, and he knew that the rider had passed by within the half-hour, for the falling flakes had scarcely blurred the imprints. There was only one set of tracks; with toes pointing toward the Lone Oak.

"No, it is not her," and Frank seemed disappointed as he spoke. "There's no one at the tree. Some one of the band must have passed through here by chance. She will come at the time—it lacks nearly an hour yet."

One swift glance had told Yates the narrow valley was empty, before he advanced into full view of the tree. As he gained the Oak, a puzzled look overspread his face.

The snow beneath the tree was trampled and scored, as though the rider had paused there for some time. Could it be that Mountain Kate had kept the rendezvous, and after waiting, had ridden on?

The trail, after leaving the tree, pursued a course precisely

similar to the one before taken by the strange maiden, and seeing this, Frank felt that she was indeed the rider.

"But it's before time—I don't understand it. Ha!"

A lump of snow, dislodged from the limb overhead by a passing gust of wind, fell upon Frank's shoulder, causing him instinctively to look upward. A bright object caught his gaze, and with a nimble bound, Yates seized it from the rough bark.

"It was she. This is part of her red plume. But how did it get there? Ha! blind fool!"

A reasonable solution of the mystery flashed across Frank's mind. Something had occurred to prevent Mountain Kate's keeping the appointment at the hour named, and she had left a token to that effect. The bit of scarlet feather had been placed there to recall to his memory the spot spoken of as a note-repository.

As Frank swung himself up into the tree, his eyes fell upon a small note stored away in the hollow, protected by a bit of fur. Eagerly clutching this, he crouched down and quickly mastered its contents.

There was neither address nor signature, but, though so ambiguously worded, Yates had little difficulty in comprehending the entire facts. It ran:

"Your life is in great peril. A serpent watched the tree yesterday, overheard all, and reported to his master. Should you fall into his power now, nothing could save you. His anger is fearful. We are both watched, but I will manage to leave this where you will find it, though we must not—can not meet again. Forget the past days, think only of yourself, and flee while there is time. A moment's delay may be fatal. I pray you go—if not for your own sake, then for *mine*."

Frank read and re-read this note, with peculiar emotions. Not that he had any difficulty in interpreting it; that was but too easily done.

A spy had witnessed their last meeting, and had told all to Carl Shensen. After that, he could easily believe his life was in danger.

But there were more pleasant thoughts conjured up by the note. The very words—the fact of Mountain Kate's braving her parent's anger to warn him—told Frank that she regarded

him very highly, if not—here his heart bounded—reciprocating his love.

“What now?” he muttered, descending from the tree. “Will Shensen break the treaty? I’ll have to make a confidant of Tobe, I guess. But one thing is settled—I don’t leave this place without seeing the dear girl once more, at least. Maybe I can—”

Though alone, Frank’s cheek flushed, his eyes sparkled, and his voice lowered. He scarcely dared whisper the waking hope even to himself.

“Yes, Tobe must know of this new turn. He is back from his traps by this time. I’ll go to the dug-out, first.”

In his present actions Frank betrayed his ignorance of frontier craft. One of greater experience would easily have avoided the danger into which he so blindly walked.

Mountain Kate, in her note, stated plainly that she was watched. If so, and situated as her home was, could she leave it in daytime, on horseback, unobserved?

Not likely. If allowed to depart, of course she would be followed and watched. Only footmen could do so and keep out of her sight—then only at a goodly distance behind.

That such had not yet come up the valley, the snow bore evidenece. And yet, in the face of these facts, Frank was carelessly walking along the back-trail, without one thought of a hostile meeting.

But he was speedily aroused from his meditation. As he gained the mouth of the valley, he abruptly paused.

From the patch of plum-brush before him, several rudely-clad forms sprung into view, and rushed toward him. Yates cocked and threw forward his rifle, but hesitated about firing.

No words had been uttered; though the men were all armed, they apparently had no intention of using them. This fact caused Frank to hold his fire.

As they came on, he sprung backward, but his feet catching against a shrub, he fell to the ground, his rifle going off in the air. Before he could arise, or make any resistance, he was securely held by half a dozen pair of hands, and then a stout thong bound his arms behind his back.

"What does this mean? Who are you?" Frank cried, angrily, as the strange assailants lifted him to his feet.

"That you are our prisoner—that we are your captors," laughed one of the men, daintily brushing the snow from his garments with a neatly-gloved hand.

"But what right—in what have I wronged you, that you treat me thus?"

"You are a trapper? Good. You catch a beaver. If it should ask you that question, what would you reply? By right of the strong hand; and I give you that answer now. Your sin? You have crossed the path of one who recognizes no law save that which he makes himself. But for that you must answer to him. I have only to take you to his presence."

"You mean your master—"

"No. I have no master. I have a chief, 'tis true, but nothing more. I am a free rover of the prairies and mountains. I come and go as I please, free as air. But that does not matter. You mean Captain Shensen?"

"Yes. Is it by his orders that I am taken prisoner in this way?"

"Cap'n Carl said as how he wasn't to know nothin' more ontel he was brung afore him," interposed one of the outlaws, who was standing by in evident impatience.

"Hold your peace, Mat Gorman. Do you attempt to teach me my duty?"

"Ef ye goes ag'in' orders, yas, Dandy George. Cap'n said fetch him thar 'thout any gassin'. You hearn him, I reckon," was the quiet reply.

"Now, since your curiosity is satisfied," added Dandy George, turning to Frank, "we will march. If you behave yourself, we will treat you decently; but go you must. How is it—will you walk?"

"Yes—lead on."

Half an hour's tramp through the snow brought them to the hill where the outlaw camp was located. Despite his perilous situation, Frank gazed curiously around him, over the rough-bearded men, the huts with their occupants; more than one fair face peered out at him through the opened doors—

faces of women and children, who appeared perfectly contented with their strange lot.

"Where is the captain, Bartlett?" asked Dandy George, of one of the guards.

"In the shanty. He's waitin' fer you, I reckon."

A rap at the door of the largest hut called forth a summons to enter, in a deep voice, and the young trapper stood before the bandit chief, Carl Shensen. Their gaze met—that of one being harsh and vindictive, that of the other, firm and composed.

"This is the fellow, then?" uttered Shensen, glancing toward Dandy George.

"Yes. We found him at the old spot, and here is a note he dropped during the scuffle.

A deep glow suffused the outlaw's countenance as he received the billet written by Mountain Kate, and quickly scanned its contents. There was a venomous glitter in his eyes as he raised them to the face of the young trapper.

"When did you receive this note?"

"Ask your spy, yonder," and Frank smiled contemptuously.

"I choose to ask *you*—answer me."

"And I choose not to reply, at least, not until I know your reason for treating me in this manner. Why have you—or your men—assaulted me, in the very face of your treaty with Tobe Castor? The week of grace is not yet over."

"You were not to trouble me nor mine—if one portion of the bargain is broken, why not another? But let that pass. I know where you got this. It was while keeping the appointment with my daughter, whose head you have turned by your hollow-hearted flattery and soft speeches. I know all—you were watched yesterday, and every word reported to me by a trusty spy."

"I said nothing then that I am either afraid or ashamed to repeat to you," quickly replied Frank.

"Don't be impudent, fellow," drawled Dandy George, affectedly.

"Richards, oblige me by visiting the guards. See that they are on duty," sharply uttered Shensen, his face flushing as though displeased.

"Now, sir," he added, as the man disappeared. "You know me?"

"I've heard of you—yes."

"Very well. You know then that I am not a man to stand at trifles. I tell you this, that you may remember your position, and not speak without weighing your words. You are the young man who killed the wolverine that attacked my daughter?"

Frank nodded.

"I thought so, and to that fact you owe *your* life. When my path is crossed, I do not often trouble myself to the extent I have in this case. I close my hand and crush the interloper. Instead, I give you another chance. Now tell me—have you decided to leave this valley, as you were warned?"

"You allowed us a week for deliberation; the time is not up yet."

"Beware! my temper is none of the evenest. An impudent tongue can avail you nothing here. Will you answer my question?"

"We have not decided yet, whether to go or stay."

"Stay! can you think of it for one moment? Do you know that I have over three score men here, to whom my will is law?"

"Twenty to one is long odds; but greater have been fought before now," quietly replied Frank.

For a moment Shensen was silent. His keen eyes severely scanned the face of the young man before him, but could detect no bravado or foolish boasting there.

"I said you were overheard, yesterday. How am I to interpret what you told my daughter?"

"As it was spoken. I told her nothing but the truth."

"You would marry her—knowing her father to be such as I am?"

"Yes."

"When she refused to desert me, you said I was welcome to a share of your home. That was a lie?"

"No—I meant it all. What I said then, I repeat now. I am rich in my own right, and if you will agree, half of it is at your disposal on condition that you abandon this life and

give me your daughter," and Frank's face flushed with eagerness.

"You may mean well—but this is all folly. I am too well and widely known for that. It would be thrusting my neck into a noose. There are few States in the South and West that does not bear my mark. I was a member of John Murrell's clan; since that was broken up, I have led a like organization myself. I have killed nearly a score of white men with my own hand—there are three separate rewards offered for my head. After this, you can see the folly of your proposal, even supposing I felt inclined to accept it—which I am *not*. No! I will die as I have lived—a Free Rover. And my Kate stays with me until that time, be it **sooner or later**.

"But now to business. You wonder why I have sent for you? Good. Listen and I will tell you. You are the first man who has ever breathed the word love into her ear, and you must promise, on your word of honor, as a man and gentleman, never to repeat that or like words to my daughter. Will you give that promise?"

"No. I will make no promise without knowing it will be kept. You ask an impossibility."

"How so?"

"I told you that I love her; I wish her for my wife. Is it so strange, then, that I should refuse?"

"So—you are obstinate. Promise never to mention this matter to her again, without my consent, and you may go free—unharméd."

"And if I do not?"

"Then I will kill you," came the reply, low, but strikingly clear and distinct.

"I will tell you as I did her; since it must be so, I will leave this place now, but I will not give up my hope of winning her, eventually. My love is not that of a boy; it is for all time."

"That will not do. You must pledge your honor never to seek her out—never to address her when you chance to meet, until I say you may."

"That I will not promise. You ask too much," firmly replied Frank.

"Beware!"

"I have spoken. I will not lie, even to you. You have the power now, and, if you like, can murder me, like the others of which you boasted. But you can't make me swear to a lie."

The change that came over the outlaw chief was frightful. His countenance flushed to a sickly purple, and his eyes fairly seemed to emit electric sparks.

His lithe form crouched forward, and one hand drew a revolver. The hammer raised with a metallic click, and the black muzzle stared Yates full in the face; but the young trapper did not flinch. He stood erect and motionless, his face pale but composed, looking the desperado full in the eye.

"Hold! Father, you shall not murder him!"

The words rung out clear and distinct, as the door behind Shensen was flung open, revealing an inner apartment. Mountain Kate sprung forward and clutched the leveled weapon, just in time.

The pistol was discharged, but its contents, that otherwise would have bored the young trapper's skull, passed harmlessly through the frail roofing. Shensen uttered a snarling cry, but his daughter clung desperately to his arms, despite his frightful cursing and blasphemy.

"You shall not murder him—he saved my life."

"Begone—I tell you begone, before I forget myself and do you an injury," gritted Shensen, raising his clenched fist before the brave girl's eyes.

"Strike—it will match your murdering a bound and helpless prisoner. Father, remember yourself—think what this is you would do. God helping me, I will save your soul from this!"

"Kate, you are foolish. Go back to your room. This is no place for you," and the uplifted hand of the outlaw slowly sunk to his side, while the angry flush gradually died out.

"No—I will not go until you promise me that you will not—not harm him," faintly uttered Kate, as though the trial had been too severe for her strength.

"Go, then; I promise to give him another chance. I will give him until to-morrow night. You can trust me, child."

Kate turned and left the room, and Shensen barred the door behind her. Then resuming his seat, he closely scanned the countenance of his captive for several moments, in silence.

"You heard my promise: I give you until to-morrow night to decide."

"I have already decided. I did not speak from impulse. I am willing to leave this valley at once."

"And never seek an interview with my daughter? If you ever chance to meet you will shun her?"

"No, I will not promise that. You wouldn't believe me if I did."

Shensen uttered an exclamation of impatient disgust. This obstinacy nettled him greatly.

"You are a fool—a blind, unreasoning idiot—who deserve death a thousand times. You presume upon your escape this time, but you are wrong. As sure as both of us live and draw breath now, unless you change your decision, and give me the pledge I ask, you shall *die*. I have sworn it!"

Frank did not reply, and then the outlaw chief summoned a couple of men, to whom he gave sundry directions concerning the safekeeping of the captive. Then, as Yates was led away, Shensen sat down with a capacious black bottle for a companion. In such moments as these, he was carefully avoided by all.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CHEYENNE CHIEF.

It was mid-forenoon of the day succeeding that which marked the capture of Frank Yates. The guard on duty at the head of the pass sounded a low note upon his horn whistle, then settled back upon his robe.

"What is it, Barker?" asked Dandy George, as he glided to the man's side.

A nod and grunt directed the officer's attention toward the

cause of the warning note. A low whistle broke from his lips, and an expression of surprise rested upon his countenance.

"An Indian, by my honor!" he muttered. "What can he be doing here, and alone, at this time o' year?"

"Mebbe not so 'lone as you think," grunted Barker. "I see'd a big trail yist'day, over the river. Not less'n forty of the imps, an' mebbe more'n thet."

"Why didn't you report, then?"

"Cap'n was—wal, *you* know how—an' you was gone some'r's. Then I went on duty an' forgot it. But look! the pesky varmint knows we're here!"

The savage, tall and well formed, advanced slowly, though with a confident air. He bore no weapons in sight, though the ample buffalo-robe that shrouded his form might have concealed them.

Pausing when within a couple of hundred yards of the base of the hill, he uttered a peculiar whoop, then made the pantomimic peace signal generally used by the prairie Indians, both hands clasped while raised above his head.

Dandy George stepped forward and asked, "Who are you?" by raising his right hand with open palm toward the savage, then slowly moving it to the right and left. In reply, the Indian extended one arm, drawing his other hand smartly across it.

"Thet means 'Cut-Arm,' muttered Barker. "He's a Cheyenne. Had I best call the boss?"

"No. He says he's a friend, and since he is alone, there can be no harm in seeing what he wants. I'll go down and find out. Keep the reptile covered, and if I raise my hand, plug him."

"All right. I owe 'em a grudge, anyhow."

Dandy George descended the slope, and, at a gesture, the Cheyenne advanced toward him. The Free Rover scanned the symmetrical and muscular form with open admiration. Rarely had he met with a more perfect specimen of physical manhood.

"Well?" uttered Dandy George. "The Cheyenne chief would speak with me?"

"You chief? Dat you' tribe on hill?"

"Well, not exactly, though I am a chief, too: but the big chief is up yonder," laughed the outlaw.

"Me tell him, den. Toupikanick, big chief—Cheyenne war-chief."

"I don't know whether the captain will see you or not. Tell me what you want, and I will find out."

"Toupikanick go, den," tersely uttered the savage, turning upon his heel.

"Hold on—I didn't say you shouldn't see him. But, unless your business is of importance, you may be sorry for it. The white chief is not in a very good humor this morning."

The Cheyenne smiled grimly, in a manner that nettled Dandy George. Nevertheless he knew too well how desirous Shensen was of securing and retaining the good will of the different tribes, to risk needlessly offending a chief who might prove a powerful enemy. So, choking down his anger as best he might, he motioned Toupikanick to follow him.

"Barker, go tell Captain Carl that a Cheyenne wants to see him out here," said Dandy George, pausing below the level of the plateau, not knowing but the chief was a spy, the object of whose visit was to ascertain their exact situation and strength, and deeming it best to be upon the safe side.

Shensen quickly made his appearance, and after closely scanning the savage, warmly welcomed him. That whatever of suspicion he might have entertained was banished, was plainly evidenced by his inviting the Cheyenne to his own quarters.

"Taste that, chief," said Shensen, pouring out a cup full of whisky. "It will warm your heart and help us to understand each other better."

Toupikanick quickly hid the liquor, and smoked his pipe with the air of a connoisseur, and the fiery liquor did seem to loosen his tongue. As his talk was rather broken, hard to write and still harder to read understandingly, we take the liberty of presenting it in a more shapely form.

"Well, chief, you said you wished to see me. There is peace between us?"

"Yes. Toupikanick heard that a band of pale-faces had

settled here, and believed they were some of those moles who dig the earth for gold. He come with his braves to drive them away from his hunting-grounds. But where he looked for an enemy, he has found a brother. It is good. We are friends."

"I am glad of that, chief, for I am something like your own people. I fight against all pale-faces, excepting those who call me their chief. I have made friends with all except the Cheyennes—now we are brothers."

"You speak true—your words are not crooked."

"What do you mean, chief? Of course I speak the truth. My words bear only one meaning, whether spoken to friends or enemy."

"Good! Toupikanick will try his brother. If one of your braves killed one of my braves, and I should ask you for his scalp, what would you do?"

"If you could prove it, I would give him up to you to deal with as you saw fit. But why ask this? Nothing of the kind has happened?" slowly uttered Shensen.

"Yes, there has. Yesterday two of my braves went forth to hunt. They did not come back. They were good and true braves, and when we found them, our hearts were sad."

"You did find them, then?"

"Yes. Their bodies were hidden in the snow, but their spirits had taken up the long trail to the happy hunting-grounds."

"They were dead—but how?"

"One was shot with a rifle; the other was killed by a knife. Who did it?"

I don't know. Do you think it was one of my men?"

Who else? These hills are not like a big town. Pale-faces are not so many that a pappoose would grow old in counting them. The snow hid the trail, but there are only your braves and my braves in the hills."

"There you are wrong, chief. There are other white men here, and they must have done this, for I have given strict orders that my men should never injure an Indian except in self-defense."

"Who are these pale-faces? Where do they burrow, that the eye of a Cheyenne can not see them?"

"They are three trappers, or rather only two now, for I have one of them a prisoner here. They are my enemies, too."

"You think they killed my braves?"

"Yes. But still, it may have been some of my men. If so, and they are found out, I will keep my word and give them over to you for punishment as you see fit. But come, I must show you my captive, and you may find out whether or not he had a hand in the death of your warriors."

Shensen led the way to the hut where Frank Yates was confined. As they entered, the young trapper arose and confronted them, his legs having been left unbound.

"Well, young sir, how do you feel this morning?"

"None the better for fasting so long. Do you think to frighten me by starvation?"

"Fasting?"

"I have tasted nothing since yesterday morning, neither drink nor food."

"Curse that Dandy George," muttered Shensen, angrily. "I gave orders for you to be decently used. Chief, will you stay here till I come back?"

Toupikanick granted assent. In a few minutes Shensen returned, bearing food, water and a flask of liquor. His hands temporarily freed, Frank partook heartily, being, in reality, half-famished.

"You have thought well over my proposal?" at length asked the outlaw.

"Yes. I tell you now as I told you then, that I am willing to leave this valley—"

"And never try to renew your acquaintance with my daughter?" eagerly interrupted Shensen.

"No. I will not promise a lie."

"Then, stubborn idiot, you shall die! I will dally no longer with you. You choose—very well; I will not disappoint you. When the sun goes down, I must kill you. You understand?" gritted the sullen chief.

"You speak plainly enough to be understood, at all events," coolly replied Frank.

"My brother speaks hot words—what has the young brave done?" interposed the Cheyenne.

"He is my enemy—he is one of the trappers I told you about. Either he or his friends killed your two braves."

The brow of the Cheyenne corrugated, and he bent his gaze keenly upon the young trapper, whose lip curled slightly. Toupikanick spoke slowly :

"Two warriors of the Cheyennes took up the long trail, last sun. Does the pale-face know who sent them?"

"What if I say that I sent them home?" laughed Frank.

"Then Toupikanick will have your scalp to show his people that their brothers were not unavenged."

"What does this mean?" demanded Yates, turning to Shensen.

"It means that some one has killed a couple of Cheyennes, and the chief is resolved to have revenge. Better on you than one of my men, and if you refuse to accept my terms, I will give you over to him to deal with as he sees fit. Promise, and I will save you, if it costs half my band," muttered the outlaw, in a low tone.

"You have my answer," coldly replied Frank, turning away and seating himself upon the rude bunk.

"Chief," and Shensen was pale with rage as he spoke, "here is one scalp for you. I will tell you where you can get two more. Will that prove my friendship?"

"Yes, the white chief and the Cut-Arms will be good friends and brothers forever. Toupikanick will take the white dog to his braves and tell them of the treaty. Then we will come and smoke the peace-pipe."

"Good! You can take him whenever you wish. I only ask one thing: that you do not let him escape you. He must *die*!"

"He shall die—it is spoken. He and the other dogs shall die at the fire-stake. Toupikanick has said it."

"Captain Shensen, I ask you as a man, not to do this. If nothing but my death will satisfy you, kill me at once—but don't give me over to be tortured by this devil!" cried Frank, vehemently.

Shensen laughed, sneeringly.

"You have elected—you were obstinate and must abide by the consequences of your folly. I would have saved you, but you said no. Blame yourself, not me."

Frank's reply was interrupted by an alarm without, that startled Shensen. A sharp whistle, twice repeated, broke the still air.

"Some one is coming—guard the captive, chief, until I come back."

Shensen hastened to the head of the passage, where he beheld what had called forth the signal. Upon the level ground below was a man, evidently white, gesticulating wildly, though the words he uttered were indistinct.

"Who are you—what do you want?" said Shensen. "Stand your ground, or my men will bore you through!"

"I'm a friend—there's an enemy in your camp—he means to set your prisoner free!" shouted the man, in a hoarse unnatural voice.

"Who do you mean? Are you crazy?"

"*It's Tobe Castor, disguised as an Indian!*"

A snarl of fury broke from the outlaw's lips, as the truth flashed upon his mind. He felt that these strange words were true.

"A gallon of whisky to the man who kills the lying dog! Guard the pass, men, and make sure work of the rascal!"

Unfortunately for the informer, this speech was misunderstood, and several rifle-shots promptly followed. With a wild cry the man flung aloft his arms, and then fell heavily forward upon his face, his life-blood staining the pure snow.

CHAPTER IX.

TOBE CASTOR'S RUSE.

WHEN Tobe Castor left the "dug-out," with Tom Taylor lying there bound and helpless, he had a settled purpose in view. That object was to learn whether or no the traitor had hinted at the truth about Frank Yates.

First he visited the young man's traps, and found ample evidence that Frank had attended to them, as usual. Then

he followed the half-filled tracks with a skill worthy a ranger, until at the mouth of the little valley so often alluded to.

Here the trampled snow arrested his attention. The confused tracks, the imprints of where human forms had rolled over and over, were plainly read.

"It's so—the varmints hev got the boy!" muttered Tobe, anxiously. "Kin the old man hev gone back on his word? The stick floats that way. Tobe Castor, you was a durned fool fer trustin' sech a cuss—you was fer sure!"

Castor followed the trail until fully convinced as to where it would end. Then he turned aside to the hill from the top of which he had first reconnoitered the outlaws' village.

From this position, after an hours' waiting, he saw Frank led a prisoner from Shensen's quarters. Marking the position of the prison-hut, he turned and descended the hill.

That night he matured a bold and hazardous plan; one that seemed foolhardy in the extreme, but which he hoped would succeed from its very audacity. He visited the spot where he had buried the Cheyennes, removed the snow, securing the trappings, pouch and hair of the largest Indian, leaving their weapons still concealed.

With day dawn he began his work. His beard was closely shaven, his hair cropped short, and then before the roaring fire, he stood as naked as when he came into the world.

The Cheyennes had been in their war-paint, and as a matter of course had with them the necessary paints and pigments for renewing their toilet when required. These articles Tobe now brought into requisition.

In an hours' time he stood forth the very *beau ideal* of a savage warrior, in paint, hair, plumes and trappings. While thus occupied, a creaking of the bunk startled him, and turning, he beheld the keen black eyes of Tom Taylor closely regarding him from beneath the robes.

A frown flitted over Castor's face. For certain reasons he did not care about the captive knowing of his plans.

"So you've waked up, hev ye? Kinder 'lowed you was goin' to sleep forever."

A contortion of Taylor's features was correctly interpreted by the trapper.

"'Thirsty? Wal, I'll give ye a sup, but hain't got time to feed ye now. When I come back 'th Frank, then we'll talk 'bout thet."

Tobe removed the gag, and Taylor drank eagerly. He strove to speak, but could not. The gag had almost dislocated his jaw.

"Sorry fer ye—am, raily, but it can't be holped now. You're too full o' pesky cussedness to be trusted. Somebody mought hear your screechin's afore I got back. So open your trap—I don't want to choke ye, Tom, but I will ef you make me. Thar—now rest easy as ye kin, ontill we git back."

Then he left the "dug-out," and set forth upon his self-imposed mission, hiding his rifle when near the hill, lest it should betray him. We have seen how cleverly he played the *role* of Toupikanick, the Cheyenne chief.

But Tobe had underestimated the powers of his captive. Nerved to desperation at the thought of what might be his fate should Tobe succeed in releasing Yates, Taylor struggled frantically with his bonds.

The blood that oozed from his lacerated wrists, soaked through the buck-skin thongs. They gradually yielded until, nearly exhausted, Taylor found his hands free.

The rest was comparatively easy. Then while resting, he appeased his hunger, and with the sense of freedom, came a burning desire for revenge.

He it was who hailed the outlaw leader, and made known the identity of the disguised trapper. And he it was that fell bleeding to the ground before that hasty volley of the mistaken guards.

Half crazed with rage the outlaw chief, followed by his men, rushed madly toward the hut where he had left the counterfeit Cheyenne, and his captive. The door was closed.

"Kill them both! Shoot—cut them down without mercy!" he screamed, as he hurled his shoulder against the door.

It flew open without resistance, causing Shensen to sprawl awkwardly across the floor. He scrambled to his feet with a snarling curse, but his burning eyes did not fall upon the daring trapper.

With the exception of himself and followers, the hut was empty.

Throughout the triangular interview, Frank Yates had been playing a part, as well as Tobe. When Shensen left the hut for drink and food, Castor revealed himself and instructed Frank how to act. And only for the unexpected appearance of Tom Taylor, the bold ruse would have been a complete success.

Tobe heard the cry of the traitor, and recognized his voice; any doubts as to the purport of the words, were quickly dispelled by the fierce order of Shensen. That told him there was no time to lose.

"Quick, Frank! we must run fer it—foller me!" he muttered, as he left the hut.

"But how—where?"

"Don't talk—*act*! In a minnit the imps 'll be yelpin' on our trail. Do jest as I do, ef ye keer fer your life!"

Tobe dashed toward the hill of trees at a point almost directly opposite to that where the pass led down to the level ground. Without pausing he sprung boldly down over the escarpment, though such a course seemed certain death.

Sure footed as a mountain goat, he alighted upon a snow ledge, some ten feet below the level, and then, followed by Yates, he bounded down the steep declivity, slipping, sliding, but ever recovering himself in time to avoid a serious fall, resting like a bird upon a jagged spur, a rounded boulder that trembled beneath his weight, or swinging down by some stunted cedar; all quick as thought.

The echoes of the rifle-shots had scarce died away among the hills, ere the two fugitives were at the bottom, in the narrow defile or cañon before alluded to. Then a yell—a sharp rifle-crack from the plateau above; the spang of a bullet flattening upon the rocky wall beside them, told that their foes were upon the trail, and that the freedom so gallantly earned, must be defended by further flight.

"Come, Frank, the imps air yelpin' on the trail. It's run, now. Take it cool an' don't waste your breath. Thar's time a-plenty, I reckon. The varmints air all ahind us," coolly uttered Tobe, as he started up the cañon at a moderate run.

"But they have horses—"

"What good is hosses here? Kin they dodge through dornicks like them?" chuckled Tobe, as he writhed through a narrow passage.

"But they may cut us off—they can go around—"

"Not much. Ten mile, thet would be, while we're goin' less'n one. No, they must foller right in our tracks."

"The soft snow will betray us. They'll track us down. Our horses may not be within miles of here. We haven't seen them for a month—hardly since turning them loose for the winter," gloomily said Frank.

"Anythin' more to make a feller feel good? But I tell you we're safe, lad. Water leaves no trail. This kenyon leads to the river. We go thar, an' then I'll hide you so well a red-skin, wild fer h'ar, couldn't find ye, let alone them whisky-guzzlin' varmints back yon'. It's a hole thet hes stud me in good play more'n onc't, an' I don't b'lieve nobody knows o' it but me. I hid the place when I used it last, three year gone by, it is now."

"A cave?"

"Yas. Ruther oncomfortable in cold weather, seein' the water runs up a ways inside, but better'n bein' rubbed out, I opine. We'll cache thar ontel we git ready to leave this ground."

"We must do that soon, I fear," and Frank sighed as he thought of Mountain Kate.

"Not ontel I git even 'th thet cussed Tom Taylor. His ha'r is mine—I sw'ar it!" gritted Tobe.

Though the shouting behind them told the outlaws were in hot pursuit, Tobe took matters coolly, and from this Frank gained assurance. And this confidence was speedily confirmed.

The river was reached, and entering it, Tobe ran hastily up-stream for several hundred yards. At a point where the bank rose up into a goodly-sized cliff, he paused in waist-deep water, and stooping, lifted on edge a flat stone.

"Crawl in, Frank—quick! The imps ain't fur behind, an' ef they sight us now, all up 'th our hides!"

Yates stooped, and crawled through the darkness, blindly. Castor followed, carefully lowering the stone behind him.

A cry of wonder broke from the young trapper's lips, as he stood erect and brushed the water from his eyes. Truly, a strange sight greeted him.

They stood within a goodly-sized excavation, the walls and

roof of which seemed of solid rock. A dim light pervaded the cave, but from whence it came Frank could only guess.

Tobe stood by, enjoying his comrade's wonder, laughing heartily in his own silent manner.

"Come, Frank, le's wring out our duds, an' I'll tell you how I found it. The imps cain't smell us out here."

The explanation was simple. An otter had swum away with a trap, and the "float" becoming entangled in the entrance, had led to the discovery of the den. From several small holes and crevices in the cliff came in the peculiar light that had so bewildered Frank.

Sitting there, the two trappers laughed at the vain efforts of their foes, who, more than once, passed so close that their curses were distinctly audible. But then a new fear seized Frank.

"We have no firearms—what will we do? They will clean out the dug-out, surely."

"In co'se. But I hev my 'volvers here, an' the rest is easy. Why, lad, I'd 'gree to git weepens an' fodder fer them an' us, th'is very night, thar in the varmints' village; but thar's no need o' thet. I've got my 'volvers here, my rifle is safe hid, an' the red-skins I told you I rubbed out, 'll furnish one fer you. See?"

With this Frank was content.

CHAPTER X.

A TREACHEROUS SHOT.

THAT night Tobe stole out and recovered his rifle, together with those formerly belonging to the dead Cheyennes, taking also their ammunition. He cautiously reconnoitered the dug-out, but, though finding it still standing and apparently unmolested, he would not risk a visit just then, feeling assured that it was watched in hopes of the owners' venturing thither.

He also visited his traps, and after cutting off the tails of

such beaver as were caught—that portion of the animal being the only one eatable, as the body meat is very dry and bitter, tasting strongly of the cottonwood bark, on which the beaver feeds almost exclusively—he buried traps and all in the snow, knowing that otherwise they would be found and confiscated by the outlaws.

For two days the refugees kept quietly in their den, their only work being to form a mode of getting their weapons in and out of the cave without passing them through the water. This was accomplished by enlarging a hole in the side, where a bush sheltered it from outside view. Thus one inside could pass the weapons to his comrade without, when the hole would be stopped up by a fitted stone.

During this time Tobe was relieved of one source of uneasiness. Barker, the outlaw sentinel, had spoken the truth when telling Dandy George he had observed the trail of a large band of Indians.

To this band had belonged the two Cheyennes slain by Castor, and their mysterious disappearance had been investigated. The bodies were found by their once comrades, and with the discovery came thoughts of vengeance.

In brief, the Cheyennes had attacked the outlaws' stronghold, and though defeated, made their mark deep and sore. When the uproar told Tobe this, he chuckled long and deep.

"It'll be the eend o' the varmints. Them reds as got away 'll fetch back more, an' then good-by, Mister Pirates! We must git to work now. I want a whack at that Tom fust."

"And what will be poor Kate's fate?" murmured Frank, mentally.

The snow was hard frozen now, its crust amply strong enough to bear up a man's weight. Both the refugees had left the cave, ostensibly with the same purpose: that of bringing Taylor to account. But while Castor thought only of this, Frank dwelt in mind far more upon the opposite passion.

Yates, then, visited the oak tree, and found there ample evidence that he was not forgotten, himself forgetting that enemies might equally as well have marked and scored the snow-crust with hoof-tracks. He believed that Mountain

Kate had been there, in hopes of hearing from him, or—and his eyes glowed—of meeting him in person.

He crouched down under shelter of the plum thicket. Hour after hour passed by, and still he sat there, watching and yearning for that which bade fair never to come.

Then his heart beat high and fast. Through the leafless twigs he caught a glimpse of an approaching figure. Nearer, a woman; still nearer, Mountain Kate!

Their meeting was joyous and heartfelt, though not to such a degree as Frank had anticipated in his day-dreams. There was a subtle dignity in the maiden that curbed his passionate ardor.

"You should not have lingered," chided Kate, earnestly, as they stood face to face beneath the trysting-tree. "The band is still searching for you, and should they find—"

"Could I leave without seeing you again?" uttered Frank, as she paused, trembling. "You saved my life, that day. I wished to thank you for that."

"There is no need. But if you are grateful, prove it."

"How?"

"By seeking safety. Fly while you can."

"And leave you? No, I will not do that, Kate. I told you I loved you. You must believe me now, for you heard it tested. Do you think, then, that I would go and leave you here? You may call it folly, but I would rather stay, knowing you are near, even though convinced they would kill me, than go, without knowing whether we would ever meet again."

"It is folly—you had ought to go. There are others far more worthy of your love than I, for at best I could only give you a—"

The sentence was never completed; the low, tremulous words gave place to a piercing shriek as Frank groaned and staggered backward, his life-blood sprinkling the snow.

A venomous report broke upon the air—a rifle-crack, closely followed by a yell of triumph, and then a clear voice shouted:

"Hurrah! boys, he's got his ticket!"

Up the valley dashed four men. The foremost brandished a rifle, the smoking muzzle of which marked it as the one

from which had sped the treacherous shot. That man was the traitor trapper, Tom Taylor, whom we last beheld falling to the snow as though dead. But the hasty volley had spared his life, though one missile, more truly aimed than the other, creased his skull, stunning him. He speedily recovered, and was admitted as a member of Captain Shensen's band.

Frank Yates reeled and fell, his breast stained with the blood that sprinkled the snow. This sight, together with the words of the murderer, changed Mountain Kate from a trembling maiden to an avenger of blood.

A cry broke from her lips, fierce and vindictive: so strange and unnatural was it that the outlaws paused in dismay. She seemed like the mountain panther, face to face with the destroyer of its young.

One lithe arm shot out—the sun's rays glittered upon the polished tube. A report—a yell of agony; then a fall. Tom Taylor lay writhing upon the snow-crust, snarling and groaning like a stricken beast of prey.

His comrades stood in open-mouthed indecision; but not for long. The stately thumb and forefinger worked like magic. One, two, three, four reports followed each other, regular as a time-piece. A confused heap lay upon the snow. Yells, curses and groans filled the air.

One man fled down the pass, his right arm dangling helplessly by his side. The other three dotted the blood-stained river. Their earthly race was run.

Mountain Kate sprung after the fleeing outlaw, but paused at the second leap. She stood undecided, a glance at him, then at Frank.

A groan from the young trapper decided her. She sprung to his side and raised his head to her lap, pressing her lips passionately to his forehead.

Frank opened his eyes and she shrunk back, affrighted. They closed again—she bent forward and repeated the act. Then their gaze met. One moment thus, and then their lips were pressed together in the first kiss of pure love.

The passionate warmth of his caress alarmed Kate, and she shrunk back. Frank arose to his feet, unsteadily, this time, yet very unlike a dying man.

But this was not wholly a miracle wrought by love.

Though the traitor's aim had been true enough, Frank's course was not to be ended there.

The bullet, striking a rib, had glanced aside, instead of piercing his heart, as intended. The shock had caused him to swoon; the touch of love's warm lips had awakened him to life.

Their words, their actions for the next few minutes, need not be recorded here. Mountain Kate had recently acted like a very heroine. *Now*, she acted like a woman, whose heart was made for loving. Believing Frank dead, she had proclaimed her love; seeing him alive she would have denied this, but he gave her no chance to do so. Then woman-like, she yielded.

Kate noticed the blood dripping from Frank's side, and woman-like again, made an outcry. He proceeded to stanch it, in a hasty manner, while she turned toward the three outlaws.

Two of these were quite dead. The third—Tom Taylor—lived, though the ghastly face and livid lips told how nigh he was to his earthly end. As Frank came forward, the traitor gnashed his teeth, and cursed him bitterly.

With a pitying glance, Frank stooped and placed his head in a more comfortable position. His traits those of the serpent, the dying man dealt one more blow.

Mountain Kate screamed as the bared steel flashed in the light. But it was a dying effort, and the knife-point only grazed the trapper's side. Ere his weapon struck the snow-crust, the trapper's spirit had fled. He was dead.

Drawing to one side, the lovers—for such they were, now in words as in heart—conversed earnestly. Their speech need not be detailed; in substance, it was the same as that already recorded.

Frank pleaded his cause warmly: Kate resisted. She would not desert her father. While he lived, her place was with him. The only concession that Frank could obtain was that when this duty was ended, she would come to him.

"But now you must go—I have been very foolish. One of them escaped, and will hasten to tell father all. He will come with more men to kill you. Flee, Frank, I pray you, go!"

"But you—he will——?"

"No—he will not harm me. I am safe from injury, though his anger will be fearful. Go---go!"

"I will. But you will remember to-morrow, at the hill, where we hide?"

"Yes---yes."

Their lips met and then they parted. Frank glided away through the plum thicket and took a roundabout course toward the cave.

Halfway hence, Mountain Kate met with a party of outlaws. With loud cries they rushed toward her, but quickly paused, shrinkingly, before her leveled pistol.

"Keep your distance, dogs," and her voice rung out clear as a bell. "I will go to the village, but not by force."

Two of the outlaws fell in behind her, at a signal from Dandy George. The others hastened on toward the valley.

Mountain Kate smiled. She knew that by this time her lover was far away, and safe from them at least.

CHAPTER XI.

TOBE TURNS MOLE.

THAT day was destined to be another momentous one in Tobe Castor's calendar. With Frank he had set forth in quest of revenge, but as they separated, he turned toward the dug-out, knowing this would be the point most likely to be watched by the enemy, and here he believed would be found the traitor, whose heart would be hot for revenge upon the man who had treated him with such scant ceremony.

For fully three hours Castor reconnoitered the "dug-out," before crossing the river, and even then would not have ventured, only for the actions of old Turk, who, until now, had not been seen by him since the ambush. He knew now that the dug-out was clear.

Tobe found it much as he had left it, and selecting such articles as he most needed, he scaled the hill, and crouching

in the niche, closely watched the hut. But as the hours rolled on without the desired appearance, Castor resolved to change his base.

While descending the hill, the crackling snow drowned a suspicious sound that otherwise would have caught his ear—the sound of distant firing. Had he heard them, Tobe would have avoided the danger into which he now walked, as it were, blindfolded.

Half an hour later Castor turned the corner of a hill, and stood in full view of a number of men, whose arms and garb proclaimed them members of Carl Shensen's band. They were those under the lead of Dandy George, who were searching for Frank Yates.

Tobe dodged back, quick as thought, but too late. A triumphant yell from the outlaws told him they had observed the action, and were upon his track.

Castor wheeled and fled. His feet slipped upon the glazed snow-crust, and he fell heavily at full length. Almost as a rebound, he was upon his feet, but then he found that the fall had nearly sprained one of his ankles.

Half a dozen leaps told the old trapper this was no trifling injury. He knew that flight was now out of the question. The light-footed outlaws must speedily overhaul him.

"But they must fight for it," he gritted, as he turned to the left, where grew a dense clump of plum-brush. "It'll be the dearest skelp they ever tuck!"

The exultant cries of those in pursuit told plainly that they had noticed Castor's lameness, and augured from it an easy victory. Tobe smiled grimly as he heard their voices, and then a bright glow filled his eyes.

Quickly turning, his long rifle rose to a level, and with its crack a shriek of death-agony came, telling that the first blow had been struck with significant effect. An answering volley came, but the wary trapper had resumed his flight, dodging and leaping in a zig-zag manner, and a derisive yell from the fugitive told the outlaws that their aim had failed.

Several paused to reload, but others drew their revolvers and dashed on. Then Tobe turned at bay.

Knowing how hopeless flight would be, he had headed toward a small clump of plum-brush, that thickly stud the region

dealt with, where he resolved to make the best fight he could. At its edge he paused and fired two shots, then darted under shelter.

From this his revolvers spoke rapidly, and the charge of the outlaws was checked. One of their number fell, death-stricken. Another cursed horribly as he nursed his broken arm. Still another shot came, stinging Dandy George in a sensitive spot, when the outlaws turned and retreated hastily, until at a point without range, or else taking advantage of such hollows and drifts as would afford them shelter from the pitiless aim of the trapper.

Castor uttered a loud laugh of taunting triumph at this, and then busied himself with reloading his weapons. But then a shade fell upon his face.

One of the outlaws suddenly sprung up and dashed away from the spot. Tobe threw up his rifle and fired, but with a derisive shout, the man sped on, untouched.

The object of this move was plain. He had been dispatched to the village for assistance, while his comrades remained to keep the trapper at bay, and prevent his flight before reinforcements should come.

"The cowardly varmints!" gritted Castor. "Thar's seven o' the imps, an' yit they're afeared o' one man. They want the hull kit fer the job. Only fer my leg I'd make a rush, an' hev it out now; but they'd pick me off afore I got half way, limpin' so."

Several shots were now discharged at the clump of brush, by the outlaws, in the evident hope of disabling the dreaded foe, and more than one hissed uncomfortably close to the trapper's head, as he crouched low down. His fertile wit quickly divined a method of guarding against this peril.

His stout knife quickly pierced the snow-crust, and then, crowding the soft dry snow aside, Castor crouched down in the hole thus made, his head then being brought to a level with the unbroken crust beyond. Tobe could laugh at their shots now; only a resolute charge could dislodge him, and that he knew would not be made before the arrival of reinforcements from the village.

"Ef the brush war only more of it, or ef the imps wasn't

scattered so much, I'd try to retch the river thar," and Tobe glanced wistfully behind him. "The bank is plenty high, an' I could sneak 'long behind thet hill. Ha! a durned fool, ye be, Tobe Castor, not to 'a' thunk on thet afore. He! he! we'll fool the varmints yit!" and the trapper laughed long and loudly, no doubt greatly to the surprise of his enemies, who poured a hasty volley into the thicket.

One of their number thoughtlessly exposed himself in the confusion, and a bullet from Castor's rifle added another victim to the list. Though yelling and cursing loudly, the others did not venture upon a rush. They evidently dreaded the consequences.

Tobe slung his rifle upon his back, and carefully placed both revolvers inside his close *wammus*. With one look around him, as though taking his bearings, the trapper ducked his head, and plunged into the snow, beneath the thick crust!

This was the happy thought that caused his laugh. He believed that he could yet foil his enemies, *by turning mole!*

The snow beneath the crust was light and dry, hence it was not so difficult as one might imagine for the sturdy trapper to force his way through it, as both hands were at liberty.

In fifteen minutes' time he had traversed the distance required, and suddenly breaking through the snow, he tumbled head-foremost down the river-bank. Fortunately, the noise of his fall was not overheard, and then, crouching low down, he glided cautiously along until hidden behind a hill.

After this, there was nothing to delay him, and when nearing the hill-curve, he heard the wild cries of anger behind him, telling that his *ruse* had been discovered. The reinforcements coming, a simultaneous rush had been made, and the thicket taken—but not the trapper.

When the hole was discovered, the outlaws believed their prey safe within their power, but an investigation revealed the truth. Then Carl Shensen swore a bitter oath that he would yet slay the trapper, though it cost him his own life.

"Yell on, ye houn's," muttered Tobe, as he gained the

cave-entrance. "Smarter men nor you be hev bin fooled by Tobe Castor."

Entering, he found Frank Yates awaiting his coming, eager to reveal his momentous tidings.

CHAPTER XII.

UNTIL DEATH!

TOBE's excitement was great when Frank told the story of his adventures. A fierce glitter of triumphant joy filled his eyes as he heard of Tom Taylor's death. It may not have been a Christian spirit thus displayed; but it was a human one, and Tobe did not pretend to be more than a man.

"Wal, now thet he's paid up, thar's nothin' left fer it but to travel. I hate like ge mently to run, but we'd be durned fools to stick it out any longer. We mought fool 'em fer a while, but they'd on'arth us *some* time, an' then it'd be good-by. They're too many fer us to han'le. Best git ready to make tracks to-night, Frank."

But Yates demurred. He told Tobe of the appointment made for the morrow with Mountain Kate, and declared that he would not go until after that had been kept.

"Thar ye go, Frank," said Castor, seriously. "It's like you hot-heads. Thet gal 'll be the death o' you yit. The varmints 'll watch *her*, an' so git *you*, fer sure."

But Yates was stubborn, and Tobe, though greatly against his judgment, was forced to yield the point. As Frank had promised to make good his loss, in addition to paying his wages, he could only advise, not command.

Little did they dream, as they lay down to rest that night, of the surprise that awaited them. If they had, little slumber would have visited their eyelids.

When Mountain Kate reached the outlaw village, she was met by her father in silence, and led to her room. Then, with closed doors, a stormy scene ensued.

Half-drunk, Shensen spoke as he had never before ad-

dressed her. His words were not only harsh and stern, but even insulting.

High spirited, Kate retorted. One word led to another, until, frightfully angered, Carl Shensen raised his hand and struck his child a fearful blow, full in the face.

She fell at his feet, bleeding and senseless. He stood as if turned to stone. Then falling upon his knees beside her, he wept and raved, striving to restore her to consciousness, but for some time in vain.

When her senses returned, Kate shrunk from him in loathing. As he implored her pardon, she pointed to the door, and awed by her still anger, Shensen left her alone, though barring the door behind him.

Kate secured the door upon her side, and then, after a long deliberation, set to work. By nightfall she had cut a passage nearly through the frail wall, and then sitting down, waited for the proper time to put her resolve into execution.

Mountain Kate had weighed the matter well, and, caused by her father's brutal behavior, had determined to seek peace and happiness in flight. Better trust in the truth and care of the young trapper than remain to live such a life as this.

She removed the severed bark, and emerged from the hut. At the same point where Tobe Castor had fled down the hill-side, she cautiously descended, and thus followed the cañon to the river.

While looking for the points indicated by Frank, a significant sound startled her. It came from the outlaw village, and from the faint yells, the rifle-shots so rapidly following each other, she knew that the encampment had been attacked.

While in doubt whether to flee or return, for now that he was in danger, Kate's love for her father returned, the form of a white man appeared before her. The shriek that rose to her lips was checked as she recognized Frank Yates, and then they were clasped in outstretched arms, while Tobe Castor looked on in open-mouthed astonishment.

That night wore wearily away, the refugees feeling considerable anxiety as to the result of the conflict, though from widely differing motives. At last Tobe could not resist the pleadings of Mountain Kate, and ventured forth to discover the truth.

By cautious reconnoitering he succeeded. The village had been surprised by the Cheyennes, guided by the survivors of the former attack, and, though fighting desperately, the outlaws had been defeated—almost massacred, it might be added, for not one of the band escaped the slaughter, though many a dusky warrior first fell before their arms.

Kate's anguish was great when she heard the trapper's report. She had truly loved her father, and now that he was dead, she only remembered his kindness and acts of love. Worn out by grief, she sobbed herself to sleep.

Not until the third day did the refugees venture from their retreat. Then a fearful sight met their gaze as they visited the plateau. The huts had had been burned to the ground. Everywhere lay scattered the polished bones of men, while hosts of wolves still slunk around the spot where had been given them such a glorious feast.

Scattered over the plain were a number of horses, that had escaped the bonds of the Cheyennes, and four of these were soon caught. One was burdened with the traps and such pelts as had been saved, while our three friends rode the others.

Though meeting with many adventures and enduring great suffering, the little party reached Fort Laramie in safety. Here they became snowbound, and winter setting in with unusual severity, they were forced to resign all hopes of reaching the States until Spring.

Frank had little difficulty, under the circumstances, in persuading Kate to undergo a certain ceremony, in which the chaplain of the fort had a good deal to say, and we can safely state that never before had that old station been the scene of such gayety as on this occasion.

We need only add that in the spring Frank took his lovely bride home, where she was kindly welcomed. They still reside in St. Louis, happy and contented, surrounded by a goodly family.

Tobe Castor still manipulates the traps, and from him in person many of these facts have been gleaned.

THE END.

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